

The Evans Boy

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The Evans Boy

by [lonibal](#)

Summary

*“Mr. Evans,” Ollivander said, smiling wider. “Any relation to Lily Evans?”
“Who?”*

Harry Evans was almost like any other boy growing up in Cokeworth. He lived alone in a house nobody else could see, he stole food from the supermarket and never got caught, and he had a little brother who had been hidden after the night their mother was killed. Harry was a secret, and he promised not to tell.

A letter in an empty vault, a small boy with broken glasses, a portrait of a scowling girl. As Harry begins unraveling his own past, the threat against his brother grows.

How long will his secrets keep when Harry is the only one standing between his brother and the world?

A story about family, friendship, growing up, and, of course, the most powerful magic of all

Chapters 1 to 8 - Pre-canon - 29k

Chapters 9 to 23 - PS - 59k

Chapters 24 to 49 - CoS - 107k

Chapters 50 to 90 - PoA - 159k

Chapters 91 to 172 - GoF - 314k

link to discord thingie: <https://discord.gg/bBmc8ZUJ4d>

Halloween, 1977

Lily Evans wasn't a nice person. She was a good person, and a kind person—so she would like to think—and a fiercely proud person. When she said she would take something to the grave, she meant it. And that is exactly what happened.

Almost.

There wasn't any particular moment when she decided to go through with it. There was nothing special about that day, other than it was Halloween and 1977. Lily hadn't spoken to Severus in months. She had seen him over the summer, of course, that was inevitable. She had gone to his mother's funeral, as if things like *mudblood* and *Death Eaters* didn't hang between them.

Lily knew he was sorry. She knew how he felt about her, could sense his lingering looks as she passed him in the hall or took the seat in front of him in Charms. They no longer sat together in any of their shared classes. God forbid she sully his secondhand robes with her filthy blood, as if they hadn't grown up in the same common soil.

So, no, she hadn't spoken to him in months, but she hadn't spoken to Petunia in longer and some relationships could never truly die. And when Severus cornered her that Halloween outside of the Great Hall, looking sad and pathetic, she reminded herself that the only other person who truly cared for him had just died.

Lily silently followed him out onto the grounds for whatever little ceremony he had arranged. And when he looked at her with those big, dark eyes like she was the only thing that mattered in the world, his thin lips pressed in a grim line and turning blue with the cold, she leaned across their sputtering fire and warmed them as best she could.

It was just one kiss, one night, one last memory before the war they pretended wasn't happening finally tore them apart for good.

Magic was old. Ancient. It moved with purpose and intent, wove itself so thoroughly into the fabric of the world that to remove it would unravel them all.

When one month passed, then another, and the blood that had began when she was twelve never appeared, Lily knew there had to be some solution to this new problem. She felt sick

with the possibilities, before realizing that it too was a symptom. She wasn't even eighteen yet. James Potter had just started looking less like a prat and more attractive than he had any right to be.

She didn't know what to do, so she did nothing, hoping for a solution to magically present itself. It did, in a sense, when she was in the library studying for NEWTs. A small, tattered book of the kind that ought to have been burned along with the witches who carried it, somehow having miraculously survived that dreadful era. She took it into the prefects' bathroom with her, cut a clean line down her wrist, wrote the runes on the soft mound of her stomach, biting her lip as tears ran down her face.

Runes of protection, of secrecy.

It was so stupid. There were ways of dealing with it. Magical ways, safe ways. *She wasn't even eighteen.* But she was curious, and it was *hers*, and admitting to it would mean admitting to what she had done, and she didn't know which was crueler.

Sometimes it was easier to pretend.

Lily's mother noticed immediately.

How a plain muggle woman could see through what an entire magical castle hadn't was beyond Lily. The illusions she had woven around herself had rendered her *state* entirely imperceptible to all senses. And yet, her mother knew.

"How long?" her mother asked, forcing her into a chair at the kitchen table. Lily's father was still at work at the factory, a double shift. Petunia was staying with one of her uni friend's over the summer, as she had the previous year and the one before. She was not coming back to Cokeworth.

"He's due in a month," Lily said, raising her chin in defiance.

Her mother said nothing, just busied herself putting out tea and biscuits, frowning in thought.

Lily watched her. She knew her mother hadn't been much older when she had Petunia. Her parents had both been young. People from Cokeworth burned fast and bright, like the cheap coal that had built their town.

"There's a war going on," Lily said. "I can't..."

Her mother sighed, staring into her teacup as if she had the ability to read the future secreted in its leaves. "I suppose it isn't too late for your father and I to have another child."

There was one condition Lily had for joining the Order of the Phoenix. Protection for her parents and her sister.

She kissed the baby, her *son*, goodbye and left him in the arms of his crying grandmother. The war wasn't in Cokeworth. The lines had been drawn elsewhere. So Lily left.

Lily read about the factory explosion in the *Daily Prophet*. That's how she knew it wasn't merely an accident, but a targeted attack.

Her father was dead.

She hadn't seen her son in over two years. She had been blindsided by a whirlwind romance with James Potter. He was brave, charming, handsome, and could make her laugh even in the darkest of times. He wasn't a substitute, nor was the second child that had surprised her with his arrival.

There was something about Halloween, either she had the worst luck or the best.

When James suggested they name their son Henry, after his grandfather, Lily put her foot down. She had already named one child after *her* grandfather Henry. She couldn't tell James that, though. Not yet. When the war was over, when it was safe to go home to her mother and her son, when it was safe to tell James the truth...

"Let's get married," James said with a hopeful smile.

"I suppose we ought to," Lily replied, but she was smiling too.

It was Halloween again, and Lily was in hiding. She watched the snow falling silently outside, bouncing baby Monty on her knee as James made him laugh with a parade of animal-shaped bubbles. Harry was already three years old. His earliest memories would not have her in them.

"James," she said. "There's something I have to tell you."

He paused in his bubble production to look up at her. "What is it, love?"

"I—"

The door burst open.

“Lily! Take Monty and run!”

Lily ran.

She made her final stand in front of Monty’s crib. The house had four bedrooms, she had insisted on that. She had been planning on what to do for Harry’s room. And now a monstrous man had killed her husband, would kill her, and finally kill her son.

One of her sons.

Lily stared into those cruel red eyes. At least one of her children would survive.

“Kill me instead,” she demanded.

And he did.

Cokeworth

Chapter Summary

Introducing Harry Evans

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Henry Samuel Evans had a happy childhood. As happy as a secret could be.

He knew his gran was to be called *mum* in public, the rare times they ventured out of the secret house no one else could see. He knew his mum was dead, and that his dad probably was too, even though who his dad was was another secret. He knew he had a half-brother named Fleamont James Potter, and a cousin named Dudley, and an aunt and uncle named Petunia and Vernon who never wrote back to his gran or answered phone calls. Most importantly, he knew he was magic. That was the biggest secret of all.

He was a small boy with unkempt black hair and dark eyes, rawboned in the way little boys who grew up in Cokeworth often were. He played in playgrounds with pitted concrete and warped steel, threw rocks through the windows of the old factory where his grandfather had died, hid under bushes whenever the gang of older boys ran out of cigarettes and got a little too bored, pored over his mum's old school things, gave the owls that delivered the *Daily Prophet* bits of bacon, did all the school assignments his gran stacked in front of him, dreamed about a magical castle filled with dark secrets and grand adventures.

It was a happy childhood.

Then the already stretched pension began to run out. Years of smoking and factory fumes caught up with his gran. Her lungs swelled, her lips became stained with blood. There was no one else to take care of her, so Harry would wipe the blood from her mouth and help tie her shoes, rub her thin back when she was on the phone and making *arrangements*.

When his gran died he got her ashes in a plain vase. He put it on the mantle next to the pictures of people he never met. A smiling, red-haired girl. A gnarled and tired man. A bitter woman with wispy blonde hair. His gran in black-and-white, when people called her Rose and she had dreams that reached outside of Cokeworth.

Harry was only eight-years-old, but he had already been taking care of himself in the years since his gran got sick. His aunt, who didn't know he existed, wouldn't take him in, Harry knew that. He had no other living family. His birth certificate, found folded in the back of his gran's secret drawer, was frustratingly silent on the matter of a father.

Magic filled in those missing pieces. Their secret house, *his* secret house, was his castle. He found a stick in the backyard to try out all the special words in his mum's old school books, until he realized the stick was just a stick and he could do without. He could make himself invisible and sneak around shops to get the things he needed. He could go into the woods and a deer would walk right up to him, sticking her throat out for him to messily cut. When he grew ill from eating the wrong sort of plant, his magic healed him. He picked over the local library's scant collection, teaching himself which plants, which *muggle* plants, were safe to eat.

He laid on his back in the silent and empty living room, staring up at the ceiling and wondering what it would be like to have a mum, a dad, a brother.

Magic helped him stay alive, but it didn't help him live. Harry had to work that out on his own.

A moon-faced barn owl soared through the kitchen window, and Harry knew it was what he had been waiting for.

Henry Samuel Evans, 13 Spinner's Circle, Cokeworth

He was unnerved that the house number was listed, as it was a secret only he knew, but the letter was magic and magic always found a way.

As he wrote a response for the owl to carry back to Hogwarts, Harry ran his tongue idly over his braces. His gran had been strict about going to all of his check ups when she was alive, and Harry had kept going after her death. His teeth had grown in all crooked, so he was happy to get them corrected. There must have been a magical solution to his dental issues, but Harry was understandably reluctant to try to do it himself, and his gran hadn't known enough about the magical world to get a magical doctor involved. There were probably all sorts of magical shots he was supposed to have.

He looked over the list of books and supplies with a frown. Harry didn't have any money. The rest of his grandfather's pension had been paid out to his aunt, and the competition for delivering newspapers, babysitting, and other odd jobs was stiff in Cokeworth. He had tried his hand at pickpocketing, and was rather good at it, but stealing from people on the dole felt wrong. He was too young for any real business to hire him, and there were the perpetual questions of *who are you* and *where are your parents* he had to avoid.

The reason he lived with his gran, why his house was hidden, and why Harry was the biggest secret of all, had to do with some evil wizard who hated people like his mum. His mum had fought in a magical war, which he read the story of in old issues of the *Daily Prophet* his gran had saved. There was even a picture of his mum and her husband—not his dad, his gran had been clear on that—the day they had been murdered and his brother had defeated Voldemort.

There had been a lot of arrests too, of the Death Eaters, but arresting someone didn't make their ideas go away.

Harry sighed and took out the map that had come with his letter, which included instructions on how to get to Diagon Alley. There were a few things he'd have to buy for himself after he checked the list against his mum's old things. Most importantly, a wand.

Harry hopped over the turnstile, ignoring the station guard who yelled at him, and scampered down the busy London streets. He had never been to London before, and was impressed by how busy and loud it was. There were a lot of people around, a lot of *muggles*, and his sticky fingers reached into unattended purses and back pockets as he bumped his way through the crowds. He found an alley with some bins to duck behind and divested the wallets of their money. He had no idea what the conversion between pounds and galleons was, but he hoped he had enough to buy what he needed.

Once inside the dim confines of the Leaky Cauldron, Harry trailed behind a trio of elderly witches in brilliant cloaks and outlandish hats, trying not to stare so much. He knew he stood out in his worn muggle clothes. They were his mum's old clothes, turned black with dye he'd stolen from Tesco. The style was dated by muggle standards, but he didn't care so much about that.

Diagon Alley violently assaulted Harry's self control. There was simply too much of it. He had never been in a place so blatantly magical. Cokeworth was grey and dull and choked with smoke issuing from the few factories still operating. Diagon Alley was bursting with color, so vivid he had to squint his eyes so as not to be blinded by it. It had everything. Cauldrons, apothecaries, owls, posters with moving pictures, cloaks and robes, dragonhide gloves, broom stores, quidditch supplies...Harry could hardly believe it, but if he lingered too long looking at one thing or another he would stand out. He needed to blend in. So he went straight for the massive building of white marble, the wizarding bank, Gringotts.

The money he had stolen weighed heavily in his pocket as Harry waited in line. One of the tellers, a small person he recognized from his mum's books as a goblin, called him forward.

"I need to open an account," Harry said, recalling the story his gran told him, of his mum's first trip to Diagon Alley.

"Name, please," the goblin rasped.

"Henry Evans."

The goblin gave him a searching look. "Follow me."

Harry frowned, but did as told, following the goblin out of the lobby and down a long hallway lit by torches.

“We’ve been waiting for you, Mr. Evans,” the goblin said.

“Have you?” he asked nervously.

“You’ve had a vault established in your name since 1981.”

A wild cart ride deposited Harry deep in the caves of Gringotts, where an intimidating door bore the number 686.

“Here is your key,” the goblin said, handing said key over. “Go on.”

Harry unlocked the door, the key turning with surprising ease. It swung open silently, revealing a small room. In the middle of the room, sat upon the floor, was a little pouch. Next to it was an envelope of thick, cream-colored parchment. He walked over and picked both items up, stunned to find the pouch heavy with large gold coins.

“Is it alright if I read this now?” Harry asked.

“Take your time,” the goblin said.

“Thanks,” Harry said, opening the letter.

Dear Harry, the letter began.

Harry's heart clenched when he recognized the handwriting. He had seen it a thousand times before. Letters sent to his grandparents. Old school notes. Her name written inside the covers of her books.

He closed his eyes briefly, grateful the goblin had retreated to the doorway, then swallowed his nerves and began reading once more.

Dear Harry,

There are so many things I want to say to you.

I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you growing up. I hope your grandmother has explained why. I don’t want to say your birth was an accident, but it certainly was unexpected. I was very young at the time, still in school, and there was a war going on. I hope by the time you read this, it is over. I hope you aren’t reading this at all, and I have been able to raise you as planned. My husband, your stepfather, and I are going into hiding. You have a new little brother named Monty, and I have to keep both of you safe. Right now, it isn’t safe for you and I to be together. There is a dangerous man after us, and I don’t want to lead him to you.

I never told your grandparents who your father is, though I'm sure mum had suspicions. He's an old childhood friend of mine. I never told him I was pregnant, as we parted on bad terms. We are on opposite sides of this war. Keeping you from him is perhaps selfish, but he chose his path, as I've chosen mine. The people he associates with kill people like me, people like us, for sport. He isn't the boy I grew up with, not anymore.

I'm certain James will love you as his own. He is a good man.

If you are reading this, and the worst has happened, I want you to know that I love you, Harry. Leaving you is the hardest thing I have ever had to do, and I've questioned that decision every day since. Maybe I should have stayed out of this war entirely, but friends of mine have already disappeared, their families have been killed, and it was only a matter of time until I was next.

I am so sorry, Harry. I want to watch you grow up, I want to see all the magic you do and the person you will become. Be strong, be brave, be the brilliant boy I know you are.

I love you, I miss you, please forgive me for everything I haven't done.

With all of my heart,

Mum

Harry silently folded the letter and put it in his pocket. He wiped his tears away and straightened his back.

"I'm ready to leave."

"Good afternoon," an old man said.

Harry jumped back, surprised by his abrupt appearance. "Hello?"

The old man, Ollivander, smiled at him. Harry smiled awkwardly back.

"I'm here for a wand?"

"Of course, of course, mister..?"

“Evans,” Harry said.

“Mr. Evans,” Ollivander said, smiling wider. “Any relation to Lily Evans?”

“Who?” Harry said immediately.

Ollivander’s eyes dimmed. “I see. Well, Mr. Evans, let’s get you a wand, shall we?”

Harry took wand after wand, watching the old man move spryly through his store, scaling shelves and muttering to himself. He was finally presented with a pale wand with dark stripes, the rings of the tree it had been cut from. It crackled in Harry’s hand, and black sparks erupted from it.

“Very interesting,” Ollivander said, gently taking the wand back. “Eleven inches, pine, and phoenix feather. Quite an old phoenix, too, for a given definition of old. Very difficult to find her. That’ll be seven galleons, my dear boy.”

Harry jerked his head up, then fished around in his pocket for the coins.

“Thank you,” Ollivander said, closing his hand over the money.

As Harry opened the door to leave, Ollivander called out to him.

“A word of advice, Mr. Evans,” he said.

Harry turned back to look at him. There was an odd gleam in Ollivander’s pale eyes, which Harry didn’t trust.

“Secrets have a way of making themselves known,” Ollivander said. “It’s best to be prepared for that inevitability.”

Harry cleared his throat. “Right. Thanks.”

“Have a good year at Hogwarts, Mr. Evans.”

The month before school began went by in the blink of an eye. Harry tried all the spells he knew, now while using his wand, and was pleasantly surprised how much easier it was. It was as if the wand amplified his magic, the words and wand movements helping guide it into the proper shape.

He had found tons of books at a secondhand store, books of spells for cooking and cleaning, on magical plants and how to grow them for food and potions, transfiguration spells for his clothes and his mother's old school robes, locking and unlocking, all sorts of magic for daily life that his school books didn’t have. The kinds of things he would have grown up with had his mum been alive.

There were even spells for running water and to get the oven started, things Harry had lived without after his gran had died and the bills stopped getting paid. Cooking in their small fireplace had been a disaster. He had seen the huge fireplace in the Leaky Cauldron, which he knew was for the Floo Network and not cooking. Harry hadn't thought about what a magical house would be like, having no context for such a thing. Based on the spells he read about, it was very different from a muggle one.

Harry's entire life had changed once again. He had to relearn how to do everything. He used magic for *everything*. Cokeworth seemed smaller than ever.

When the day finally came, Harry triple checked his trunk, closed up the house, and made his way to the only bus stop in town. He boarded the bus for the train station, and watched Cokeworth vanish through its smudged windows. He didn't think he would miss it.

Harry stood nervously with the rest of the first year students, watching a severe witch place a ragged old hat on a stool.

Each new encounter filled him with awe. The bright red Hogwarts Express, the strange route the train took, the self-sailing boats, the impossible castle. He resisted the urge to adjust his pointed hat again, or to check he still had his wand tucked in his robes.

He went rigid with shock when the hat started singing. It told them a story about the different Hogwarts houses. Loyal and hardworking Hufflepuff. Clever and creative Ravenclaw. Brave and determined Gryffindor. Cunning and resourceful Slytherin.

An older girl at the Hufflepuff table was changing her hair to different colors faster than Harry could follow, making the kids around her laugh until the older witch, Deputy Headmistress McGonagall, shot her a look.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," McGonagall said imperiously, holding a long roll of parchment in front of her face. "Alderton, Phoebe!"

The girl stepped forward and perched upon the stool. The hat covered her entire head. After a moment it cried, "Slytherin!"

Polite applause followed the girl as she joined the table with the fewest students. Harry puzzled over why Slytherin didn't have as many students as the other houses.

"Davies, Roger!"

"Ravenclaw!"

The applause for this boy was much more enthusiastic. Was Slytherin unpopular?

“Diggory, Cedric!”

“Hufflepuff!”

“Endo, Haruka!”

“Hufflepuff!”

“Evans, Henry!”

Harry was startled out of his thoughts and hurried forward. The hat fell over his eyes and he was plunged into darkness.

“Well, this is unusual,” someone said. It took Harry a moment to realize it was the hat talking to him. In his head.

And wasn’t that a scary thought, something or someone reading his mind. There were so many different kinds of magic. So much to learn.

“You’ve grown up in quite an interesting way, Mr. Evans,” the hat said. “And those are portentous secrets you wish to hide.”

Wish to? Harry thought at it, a little annoyed. *Portentous?* He was *very* good at keeping secrets!

The hat chuckled. “You’re as clever as your mother, and as shrewd as your father.”

You know my dad? Harry asked, heart racing.

“You’ll fit right in with Slytherin!”

Wait—

The hat was off Harry’s head before he could demand answers, and he walked in a daze to the Slytherin table, sitting down next to the girl named Phoebe. They were soon joined by a boy named Terence Higgs, then Adrian Pucey, Jasmine Rookwood, Astrid Urquhart, and Cassius Warrington.

“This is the biggest class of first-year Slytherins in years,” an older girl with curly red hair said, smiling at them. “Eliza Burke,” she continued, “fifth-year prefect. The other prefect is Louis Gage, that lazy-looking one.” She pointed to a chubby boy with dishwater blond hair, who was sound asleep.

"Weasley, Fred!" McGonagall called out.

“Evans?” another first-year, Jasmine, asked. “I haven’t heard that name. Who are your parents?”

Harry looked blankly at her. “They’re dead.”

"Gryffindor!" the hat shouted.

"Oh," the girl said, tugging on a few of her braids. "Sorry."

Harry shrugged, acutely aware of how awkward things had become.

A throat was cleared, and Harry was grateful for the distraction. He looked up at the head table and saw the headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, standing to address the school.

"Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts!" Dumbledore said, spreading his arms. "Unfortunately I am at a loss for words, and have yet to find them. Enjoy the feast!"

None of Harry's reading had prepared him for a honest-to-goodness *feast* materializing before him. He had never seen so much food in his entire life. He was an opportunistic eater, having had to fend for himself for so long, so Harry didn't hesitate in filling his plate with a variety of offerings. He loaded his fork with a generous heap of shepherd's pie and was about to bite down when someone interrupted him.

"What's that on your teeth?" one of the boys, Cassius, demanded.

Harry reluctantly lowered his fork. "Braces."

"I've never heard of that," Cassius said. "Are you a mud—a muggleborn? Is it some kind of muggle thing?"

Harry gave him a disparaging look. "You've never heard of it? *Really?*"

He shook his head, then ate his shepherd's pie with a little more enthusiasm than usual.

"Well, what are they for?" another girl, Astrid, asked.

Harry kept eating, letting his new classmates speculate about his braces. Theories ranged from a curse, to an artifact that tested for poisons, to a torture device. He was glad he had gone for black rubber, though given his house he might next ask the dentist for green. Some of the kids in Cokeworth had made fun of Harry for having them, but the kids at Hogwarts made his braces sound rather sinister.

Soon the table was cleared, the headmaster bade them all goodnight, and Harry was shuffled down into the dungeons along with the other first-years.

Eliza stopped them in front of a blank stretch of wall. "The password to our common room is *boomslang*."

Part of the wall slid open, and Harry filed in with the others.

The Slytherin common room was dramatic. It was underground, with windows looking out into the depths of the Black Lake. Green lamps hung on chains from the ceiling. Large, crackling fires warmed the room, as did the plush emerald green carpets. There were elegant, high backed armchairs and couches, and tables of dark wood, polished and chased with

silver. Harry wasn't sure how he'd fit into such a fancy-looking place. His fellow first-years didn't seem very impressed, perhaps accustomed to such luxury.

Harry listened as Eliza and Louis went over the house rules. Slytherin apparently had a bad reputation, so they were told to stick together and behave, and to not lose their house any points. Harry was somewhat distracted by a dark figure lurking in one corner, but the person soon came forward and introduced himself as their head of house and Potions Master, Severus Snape.

There was something familiar about the man, though Harry had never seen him before. Snape was rather distinctive, tall and pale-skinned, pitch black hair framing his thin face, a distinguished nose and an intense black gaze. He had a deep voice that demanded attention and respect, though perhaps that simply came with being a teacher.

Harry was rather looking forward to Potions. It sounded so much more complex than waving his wand around. He wouldn't be able to take the other more interesting classes until third year.

When they were dismissed, Harry followed the other boys up to their dormitory, happy to see he had been lucky in getting a bed near the window. It was like having his own aquarium.

Harry fell asleep on a bed as soft as a cloud, still looking into that dark, mysterious water.

Hi! Please don't post spoilers in the comments, I'd prefer for re-readers to do so in the [discord](#) :)

Regular Meals

Chapter Summary

Autumn term, 1989

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was the morning of his first day of classes, and Harry was as impressed by the breakfast as he had been by dinner. He could not remember the last time he'd had toast. Or bread. Stealing a whole loaf was tricky.

Harry was going a little mad with all the tea and jams, beans, toast, eggs, kippers, porridge, bacon, when a cleared throat behind him shook him out of his feeding frenzy.

"Your schedule, Mr. Evans," Professor Snape drawled. Harry took the paper and quietly thanked his head of house. Harry noticed that, unlike his housemates, he had another paper stuck onto his schedule. It was an appointment with the hospital wing for later that day.

Confused, Harry tucked his schedule into his bag and returned to his food, listening as the other first-years discussed their upcoming classes.

After his last class of the day, Harry made his way to the hospital wing.

His classes had not been as exciting as he had hoped. History of Magic, despite—or because of—being taught by a ghost, was particularly soporific. After a thrilling introduction of transforming from a cat into a person, Professor McGonagall had spent their entire double Transfiguration lesson lecturing. She was considerably more lively than Professor Binns, but it still left Harry wanting. At least in Herbology they got to *do* something, even if it was moving plants into different pots. It was mostly exciting because the plants fought back.

As soon as Harry was through the double doors of the infirmary, a white-aproned woman descended upon him.

"And you must be Mr. Evans," she said brusquely, ushering him to a pristine white bed. Harry sat placidly as the woman began waving her wand around him.

"Yes, miss," he said, growing nauseous as he watched her movements.

"Madam Pomfrey," she said, pulling several vials from her apron pocket. "You are up to date with all your muggle inoculations, correct?"

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey."

"Very good. Take these," she said, handing him the vials.

Harry looked at one skeptically. The contents were thick and green, with threads of silver running through.

"What is this?" he asked, his nausea increasing.

"A vaccine for dragon pox," Madam Pomfrey said. "Drink up!"

Harry did so, grimacing at the foul taste, and Madam Pomfrey rattled off a list of common magical ailments while handing him more vials.

"Now," she said, the empty vials vanishing with a flick of her wrist, "let's see your teeth."

Harry obligingly opened his mouth.

"It's been some time since I've seen one of these contraptions," Madam Pomfrey said, gently prodding the rubber bands.

"You aren't going to magically fix it?" Harry garbled.

Madam Pomfrey gave him a stern look. "Goodness me, no! Those muggle tooth healers know what they're about. You'll be sorted in a few years, I'm sure. In any event, you'll soon discover not everything has a magical solution!"

Madam Pomfrey took a step back and gestured for him to stand.

"Now, off you trot! You may feel a bit peaky, but that's just the potions at work. Brewed by Professor Snape himself, and a far sight better than what you'd get at St. Mungo's!"

Potions was, hands down, the most exciting class. The very first day they were doing *real* magic, brewing the Cure for Boils. There were, of course, a few hiccups.

"Mr. Weasley," Professor Snape intoned.

"Which one?" the Weasley twins asked as one.

"If your mother cannot tell the difference between you two, there is no reason to suspect me capable of such an immaterial feat. If you insist on specificity, Mr. *Fred* Weasley."

“He’s not Fred, I am!”

“I’m not Fred, he is!”

Next to Harry, Terence groaned in annoyance.

“They better not do this every class,” Astrid muttered darkly.

Professor Snape ignored the twins’ repartee. “What does one get when mixing the essence of newt spleen with an infusion of crushed banana seeds?”

Harry glanced at the twins, who had matching looks of confusion on their faces.

“I see,” Snape said drily. “Perhaps someone else can enlighten us. Miss Rookwood?”

Jasmine was sitting at the station in front of Harry, and he saw her flinch slightly. “I’m sorry, sir. I haven’t read that far in our book.”

Snape stared at her for a moment, sighed, then moved on. “How about you, Mr. Evans?”

Harry swallowed. “Those are ingredients for an aging potion, right?”

Snape gave him a considering look. “You are correct, Mr. Evans. Ten points to Slytherin.”

Next to Harry, Terence was grinning smugly, while the Gryffindors on the other side of the room were silently outraged. Harry’s mum had a collection of potions books, and it had seemed to be a passion of hers. Harry had read through them all.

The class ended rather explosively when the Weasleys added their porcupine quills before taking their cauldron from the fire, coating them and the unfortunate Alicia Spinnet with the contents of their cauldron. The affected students were rushed to the hospital wing.

Harry bottled up his Cure for Boils as chaos erupted around him. He had tried a few simple potions at home, using what was salvageable from his mum’s preserved ingredients, but this was the first time he would get another’s opinion on what he had made. Terence had proven a decent enough partner, and was at least capable of following the instructions. The opalescent purple liquid matched the shimmer in Harry’s textbook.

When Snape returned, the man’s initial fury had cooled to resignation.

“Your assignment for this week is an eighteen inch essay on the effects temperature has on different parts of the common nettle, both fresh and dried,” Snape said, watching them as if daring someone to voice a complaint. “Now, bring your hopefully finished and non-lethal potions to the front of the room.”

Harry carefully set his potion on Snape’s desk, avoiding the man’s hard gaze, then shuffled back to collect his things. He was determined never to get on Snape’s bad side.

Harry watched Madam Hooch as she paced back and forth in front of the gathered Slytherin and Gryffindor first-years. He gave the broom on the ground next to him a dubious look. It was an old broom, the handle grey and smooth from years of use, the twigs crooked or broken off completely. It did not seem like a comfortable or reliable form of transportation, but from his reading Harry knew it was the most popular in Britain, particularly after the series of articles in the *Prophet* about weaving defects in imported flying carpets. There had been a pile up of Persian carpets at the Ministry over the summer, and a lot of spirited op-eds lambasting the typically safe family vehicles.

Not wanting to be the odd one out, Harry stuck his hand over the broom and said, “Up!”

The broom bucked up and slapped Harry’s hand, nearly unbalancing him. He gripped it firmly. The enchantments were as worn as the broom itself. He noticed most of the kids from wizarding families, the purebloods and halfbloods, easily caught their brooms. Not many muggleborns ended up in Slytherin, as Harry had learned while delicately navigating conversations with his yearmates. A few of the Gryffindors, Kenneth Towler and a heavily bandaged Alicia Spinnet, had to try several times to get their brooms to cooperate, while a few of Harry’s fellow Slytherins snickered at their ineptitude.

Harry wasn’t entirely clear on his own blood status. His mum had been a muggleborn, and he knew his dad must have been a wizard since he’d also fought in the war. Did two magical parents make you a pureblood? Were halfbloods the kids of a muggle parent and a magical parent, or a muggleborn and a pureblood? What about a muggleborn and a halfblood, or a halfblood and a muggle?

It all seemed stupid and convoluted to Harry, and terrible as it meant people like his mum had been murdered over who their parents were.

“Mount!” Madam Hooch barked.

Harry swung his leg over his broom. Being bad at flying a broom would expose him as never having been on a broom before, which would mean he was either poor, which he was, or muggleborn. Or perhaps both, in his case.

“At the sound of my whistle, kick off,” Madam Hooch said, brandishing her silver whistle. “Rise three feet, maintain altitude for ten seconds by keeping your broom flush with the ground, then return to the ground by leaning slightly forward.” She looked knowingly at them, no doubt accustomed to her directions being ignored. “*Slightly*. On my mark!”

Madam Hooch blew her whistle. Harry hesitated a second, carefully watching how the kids around him had done it. Astrid, Cassius, and Terence seemed the most comfortable on their brooms, and he followed their lead. Harry pushed off the ground, his stomach swooping with his sudden weightlessness. He felt he could rise all the way to the clouds, like a balloon. It was a little scary, but thrilling, and his hands hurt with how firmly he was gripping the broomstick.

“Land!”

Harry leaned forward a little bit, then a little bit more, slowly returning to the ground. It was a struggle to keep his face blank.

“Alright, children, follow me to the pitch,” Madam Hooch said. “We’ll do several laps at *walking* speed, then see how you do with changing altitude.”

Harry copied his classmates and propped his broom over his shoulder as they trooped off to the quidditch pitch.

“I can’t believe we have to wait until second year to bring our own brooms,” Terence complained as Madam Hooch lined them up for their laps. “Do you play?”

Harry shook his head. “I’m not a fan.”

Terence looked at him as if he had grown a second head. “Really?”

“Not everyone has a death wish,” Phoebe said frostily.

“Your fringe is sticking up,” Astrid pointed out.

“What?” Phoebe squawked, trying to flatten it. “This is why I hate flying!”

“Are any of you going to try out for the team next year?” Astrid asked, smirking as she patted her own short brown hair. “I want to go for keeper.”

“Good luck with that,” Adrian said. “My cousin says Rosier is a beast. Built like a troll.”

Astrid scowled. “Size isn’t important for a keeper. You need speed. Agility.”

“That’s why I want to try out for seeker,” Terence said. “My sister says our team hasn’t had a decent seeker since Regulus Black.”

Harry sedately followed his classmates around the quidditch pitch, flying under the massive hoops that rose high above the ground. It was fun, sort of like being led around on a pony. He remembered being taken to a fair once, when his gran was still alive, where he had done just that. He patted the old broom fondly, and wondered how much it would cost to buy his own.

Classes hadn't got any more interesting as the year progressed. By Halloween, they had only just begun using simple spells in their wandwork classes. Professor Flitwick had taken them into the Great Hall to practice their Levitation Charms by helping to put up the decorations. Harry watched his pumpkin soar into the air to float menacingly above the Hufflepuff table, while a few ghosts drifted in and out of the walls to judge their work. Many pumpkins ended up splattered on the floor as his classmates struggled with the spell.

Harry didn't quite get it, especially from the ones who came from magical families. Hadn't they been doing magic for years?

He had loads of questions about the magical world, and wasn't sure who to ask. Asking the wrong question could reveal too much about himself. The library was fantastic, but Madam Pince was unhelpful and a bit mean, and most of the books had been jinxed by her under the pretense of protecting them from careless students. Half the things Harry learned in the library came from countercursing the books.

He sighed and waved his wand at a particularly vicious turnip, its eyes and cruel mouth pulsing with green light.

Halloween was one of the few times Harry had been allowed out of the house with some modicum of freedom. Not that Cokeworth had much to offer for the holiday, other than marauding bands of costumed teenagers he and the other younger kids fled from. Still, it was fun wandering about at night under an old sheet.

It was the day his mum had died, though, and the day Voldemort had been killed. No amount of sweets could make him forget that.

Harry knew Voldemort was bad, evil even, to have scared and hurt and killed so many people. He knew about people like Voldemort from muggle history, powerful men who had targeted certain groups and killed them for the mere fact that they could.

His mum had been traded in exchange for Voldemort's demise. It didn't seem like a very fair trade to Harry, not for him and not for his little brother. True, many people had given their lives to stop Voldemort, and were likely glad to do so. But what about the people they left behind?

When dinner time came, Harry followed the rest of Slytherin to the Great Hall. The students, mostly the lower years, were impressed by the live bats dive-bombing them, the Bloody Baron rattling his chains, the actual vampire who the headmaster was happily chatting with despite the lascivious looks she kept giving him.

"I can't believe they let one of *them* in here," Adrian muttered, passing a tray of bubbling cauldron cakes to Harry. "What next? A werewolf?"

Harry wasn't sure what to say about it. He was still surprised to find that vampires and werewolves even existed. It sounded to him like more of an illness someone caught. Simply being dangerous didn't mean someone was a monster.

He remembered seeing muggle newspaper articles about the AIDS epidemic, how it was called the *gay cancer*, doctors and nurses being afraid of their own patients and refusing to treat people. It was scary, but also very sad. It wasn't as if anyone intentionally caught a disease that made everyone hate and fear them. And being a vampire was kind of like an addiction. They didn't have a choice, they had to drink blood or die.

There were all sorts of magical beings who lived differently from witches and wizards. Giants, hags, centaurs, selkies, goblins, house elves, veela. It was fascinating. They all had

magic, they all had to keep themselves secret from muggles. Harry thought they were all, in the end, very similar.

"I think she's interesting," he decided. "I've never met a vampire before."

"I should hope not," one of the seventh-years, Merula Snyde, said with a faint sneer. "She'd as soon bite you as look at you."

"I doubt she'd get far," Louis the prefect said, yawning. "See how Snape's looking at her?"

Harry looked over to his head of house, who had his own impressive sneer directed at the vampire.

"I bet she's been alive for ages," Harry said. "She must have loads of stories."

He watched as the vampire lifted a goblet and drank. He guessed it was filled with blood. Human? Could she live off of other types?

"Muggles have blood banks, you know," Harry said. "They don't have potions to make more blood, so they donate it to each other."

The stunned silence made him reconsider sharing his knowledge of the muggle world.

"That's repulsive," Eliza declared.

"They also give spare organs to each other," Harry said, taking a sip of his pumpkin juice. It was thick and sweet, and available at every meal. Everyone drank it like water. Harry couldn't, on account of his braces and needing to avoid large quantities of sugar. Even with the teeth cleaning charm he had learned, it was best to be careful.

He hid behind his cup, smirking at the looks of disgust on the faces around him.

"There's no way," Phoebe said faintly. "I don't believe it."

"Animals," Terence said. "The lot of them."

"It's quite ingenious," a fourth-year girl said. "I've taken Muggle Studies, you know. I've read all about it. They haven't got magic, so they have to come up with other ways to do things."

"I don't think animals could go to the moon," Harry said, setting his cup down and cutting into his cauldron cake. The ones at the Slytherin table were filled with a green liquid, which turned out to be strawberry flavored.

"I've heard about that," Astrid piped up. "My uncle was talking about taking a broom to the moon, but my aunt told him muggles have already done it. With...rockets, I think it was."

Harry finished his cake as his housemates argued about muggles. He had got the impression that, in general, witches and wizards thought of muggles as childlike at best, crazed murderers at worst. They were weak, but also dangerous. It was bizarre, but prejudice was never really logical. He ran his tongue over his braces, dismayed at the food trapped in them.

Cassius nudged him. "How come you know all that stuff about muggles anyway?"

Harry thought it over. "Seems stupid not to."

Cassius nodded sagely, though Harry had no idea how the other boy had taken his words. Harry found it hard to imagine how a magical person would fit into the muggle world. They'd likely be treated as an eccentric, like the homeless drunks who slept at the bus stop.

Sleepy, and somewhat overwhelmed at being so involved in a conversation with half of the table, Harry was grateful when the Halloween feast came to an end. Halloween might have been a tragic anniversary for him, but at least that year he'd been able to take his mind off the sad things.

Instead of finishing his essay on locking charms, Harry was sitting in the stands for the first quidditch match of the season. Based on the non-stop screaming, it was also the most important. It was Slytherin against Gryffindor, a feud that had begun with the founders themselves.

It turned out the stereotypes about Slytherin weren't completely unfounded. Salazar Slytherin hadn't wanted muggleborns to attend, though his reasons why weren't exactly clear. Harry hoped it was for a practical reason, such as not wanting a school full of magical children to get exposed to muggles who wanted to burn them at the stake, but it had been a thousand years ago and no one really knew.

Harry also knew many of his housemates had family who had been Death Eaters, or accused Death Eaters. Rookwood, LeStrange, Rosier, Lee, Snyder, Travers. He had seen those names, and more, in old issues of the *Prophet*, in articles about the Death Eater trials. Many people hadn't even got trials, some going straight to Azkaban, whereas others were cleared by claiming to be under the Imperius Curse.

Those people, Death Eaters, were all adults. Children had no choice who their parents were. Harry's own dad had been on the *wrong side of the war*, as his mum had put it in her letter. His mum had been on the right side. Maybe his dad was in Azkaban, or dead too. How would Harry be judged?

It didn't really help that kids had started refusing to be sorted into Slytherin since Voldemort's defeat. No one wanted to be associated with the *dark* house, except for people whose names already were. Most of them were sheltered in a way Harry was not. They came from money, and had opinions on the world that sounded like they were repeating what an adult had said.

Harry had brought a book to read, and he hunched over it, grateful the prefects had taught them warming charms. Scotland got much colder than Cokeworth. His mother's winter coat was thick and warm, but well-loved and thin in the places it had been patched.

"Nice one, Rosier!" Astrid shouted. "Did you see that save? Brilliant!"

"What the bloody hell is Lee aiming for?" an upper year boy yelled. "Aim for the Weasley! Is he blind?"

Harry glanced up from his book, watching the red-haired Gryffindor seeker evade another bludger. The Weasleys were notorious for having so many children, five of them currently at Hogwarts, all in Gryffindor. The eldest was Head Boy, and the second oldest was a prefect and seeker for their house team. Harry was jealous of them. He looked forward to when Monty got to Hogwarts, but he doubted his brother would be sorted into Slytherin, if only based on its reputation. Harry wasn't sure *he* would have been had he known, but it was too late for that. And it wasn't like everyone was evil and mean. The upper years could be terse, but Harry thought that was because they were practically adults, and being around so many younger kids was annoying for them. Not to mention the fifth and seventh years had O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s to study for.

"And Weasley's caught the snitch!" the announcer, the shapeshifting girl from Hufflepuff, shouted over the cheers. "Good on you, Charlie! Really shoved your broomstick up—"

"Nymphadora Tonks!" Professor McGonagall snapped, wrestling the bullhorn away from the girl. "I don't know how many times I've warned you..."

Harry closed his book and followed the desultory Slytherins out of the stands and up to the castle.

"We've still got a chance at the cup," someone said.

There was a harsh laugh. "Not with Weasley as a seeker. He's the best this school's had in decades, even on that log he calls a broom."

"He'll be off the team in two years."

"I'll be out of school by then!"

Harry glanced at Astrid, who was deep in thought. Out of all of his yearmates, she was the most fanatical about quidditch. She was always late to breakfast, having gone to watch the team practice, and she seemed to have a grudge against Professor McGonagall, who was rumored to be rather obsessed with the game herself.

Astrid had dragged them all to the Trophy Room to moon over the great Slytherin players of old. Professor McGonagall had, as the Gryffindor captain, won the quidditch cup for three consecutive years. Harry was pleased to see James Potter, Monty's dad, having done the same. He'd seen his mum's name too, on a plaque for being Head Girl. He was concerned someone might notice they had the same surname, but most of his classmates were distracted by all the Slytherin trophies and medals. Still, while *Evans* was a popular name in the muggle world, the same wasn't true for the magical world.

Harry hoped, though it was a depressing thought, that people would remember his mum as Lily Potter and not Lily Evans. Many of the people who had gone to school with her were

dead or in Azkaban, but some of the professors might remember. He used to be sad he didn't look more like his mum, with her pretty red hair and bright green eyes, but their differences kept his identity safe.

Maybe he could be Head Boy, and there would be two Evans in the Trophy Room. The thought made him smile.

Christmastime at Hogwarts was a quiet affair. The castle had emptied overnight. Only the most dedicated O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. students had stayed, and those who had nowhere else to go. The only other Slytherin who was staying over the holiday was a fifth-year girl named Viridia Lestrange, who was a chaser on the team. She ignored Harry and buried herself in a pile of books and scrolls. Harry had heard of the Lestranges, two brothers and one of their wives locked in Azkaban. Viridia was too old to be the daughter of any of them, and was probably a distant cousin. But three members of a family in Azkaban, three confirmed and proud Death Eaters, probably wasn't good for the family as a whole. Harry was curious, but wary of asking the older girl any questions.

Harry hadn't celebrated any holidays since his gran had died, and wasn't sending or expecting any presents at all, so it was a shock to find a present on the foot of his bed on Christmas morning.

He looked around his dim dormitory, wondering how it had got there, and was cautious in touching it. He poked it with his wand and, when nothing happened, picked it up. He looked out the window, but the Black Lake was living up to its name, darker than ever now that it was encased in a thick layer of ice. He doubted anything could even get through the glass, heavily enchanted as it was.

It had to be the house elves. While Harry had never seen any, he knew the mark of a good house elf was in how unobtrusive they were. It was a point of pride for them.

Happy with his conclusion, and trusting the house elves wouldn't deliver anything to him that was dangerous, Harry pulled off the tag attached to the present. It only said *Happy Christmas*. He carefully untied the silver ribbon and peeled open the dark green paper. Inside were a pair of thick woolen gloves and several pairs of socks, all in black. Socks were always the first clothes to wear out, and he was immensely grateful for getting some new pairs. He had started to layer the ones he had, with limited success.

The woolens hummed with magic, and Harry was curious what they had been spelled with. None of his classes had got into spell analysis and wouldn't for years, and Madam Pince kept all the books on the subject in the Restricted Section. Harry wasn't even sure there *were* books on it, because Madam Pince would only obliquely refer to things that *would* be in the Restricted Section *if* the library had such books. The librarian in Cokeworth was a little old pensioner who was slow and mostly deaf, but happy to help hunt down the right book. Madam Pince was akin to a dragon sitting on her hoard.

Still trusting the house elves' judgment, Harry pulled on a pair of socks and grinned at how warm and dry they were. That was another issue with his layers of thin socks. The old boots he wore always got soaked when he trudged to the greenhouses, and he could only cast so many warming and drying charms discreetly without setting himself on fire. He sometimes wished he had brought all of his mum's books with him, since he would often think *there's a spell for that* without knowing *what* the spell was, only that he'd read about it at some point.

Harry got dressed, tucking the gloves in his coat pocket, and went to give his socks a test run on the school grounds. Snow had fallen overnight, and had lain untouched except for the large tracks from the gamekeeper's hut to the castle. Harry walked on the frozen shore of the even more frozen Black Lake, then near the edge of the Forbidden Forest, where the bare-limbed trees were laden with snow. He saw tracks from rabbits, deers, foxes, and what looked like horse tracks but were most likely a centaur. Snow had been rucked up and stained red where a bird, no doubt an owl, had succeeded in a hunt. He tested his gloves too, wearing them to make snowballs to throw and levitate through the quidditch hoops. It would have been easier on a broom, but as Terence frequently complained, first-years weren't allowed their own brooms, and breaking into the broomshed when he was one of a handful of students around was too suspicious.

Harry headed back inside when it was time for Christmas dinner. Harry thought it was a little funny that Christmas was being celebrated instead of some other, older winter holiday. There wasn't much sense as to when magical and muggle culture overlapped, which made people who tried to completely separate the two sound foolish.

The Great Hall was extravagantly decorated. The gamekeeper, a large man named Rubeus Hagrid, had dragged in what looked like the tallest trees from the Forbidden Forest, which Professor Flitwick had charmed to within an inch of their remaining lives. Magical snow fell from the ceiling as fairies flitted around. Professor McGonagall had unearthed an old record player which the caretaker Mr. Filch vigorously cranked. All the tables had been replaced by one in the center of the hall, where the school staff and students sat together. Besides Harry and Viridia, there were a few tired looking students from Ravenclaw, one who Harry thought was Head Girl, and a first-year Hufflepuff.

Viridia looked really put upon, so Harry exchanged smiles with the Hufflepuff girl, whose name he learned was Haruka, and pulled crackers with her. As with every magical thing he encountered for the first time, Harry struggled to contain his amazement and delight. The sparrows that flew out of the flashing glitter were a surprise, and they quickly found homes in the Christmas tree, as were the full Gobstones set, a hat shaped like a giant snitch with beating wings, and a small book of riddles. As the sparrows made themselves comfortable, the Ravensclaws kept automatically answering every riddle he and Haruka read.

"The password to their common room is *always* the answer to a riddle," Viridia explained, rolling her eyes.

Haruka giggled, and read another one out loud, laughing harder as the Ravensclaws dutifully answered, though their answers varied wildly.

"Well reasoned," the headmaster said cheerfully. Professor Flitwick fell out of his seat laughing, and even Professor McGonagall joined in. She was hitting the gillywater hard.

Professor Snape was goaded into pulling a cracker as well, and was rewarded with a My First Potions Kit, which he sighed over. The headmaster claimed the polka dot ten gallon hat for himself, wearing it throughout the rest of the meal. It clashed wonderfully with his robes, which had moving scenes from some play about fairies.

“Do you want any of the toffees?” Haruka asked, holding out some of the brightly wrapped sweets.

“I can’t,” Harry said, showing off his braces. He wasn’t supposed to eat anything sticky, or anything crunchy, which meant all toffee was tragically off limits.

“Ah, yes,” the headmaster said, having apparently been listening in. “Such a fascinating device, Mr. Evans!”

“Uh,” Harry said, not sure how to react. He had never spoken to the headmaster before, and didn’t know what to do with the attention of such a powerful, respected, *old* wizard.

Professor Snape saved him. “As *fascinating* as the subject of adolescent orthodontics most assuredly is, perhaps it is not an entirely appropriate topic for conversation during a meal?”

The headmaster’s eyes twinkled. “Would you care to pull another cracker, Severus?”

Professor Snape sighed again. “If I must.”

Soon the table was shrouded in pink smoke, and Harry's braces were forgotten as a live sheep landed in the pudding. A tipsy Hagrid carried her away while slurring compliments into her luxurious wool. The pudding was replaced. Viridia presented a cracker to Harry and he got a deck of Exploding Snap cards, while she got a patent leather planner which seemed to please her. Harry learned Haruka’s mother was an ambassador from the Japanese Ministry of Magic. The house ghosts floated by, and Sir Nicholas’ head flopped sadly at the lack of Gryffindor students. It was wonderful, magical, and, above all, fun.

Harry never thought he’d have a happy Christmas ever again, but this was pretty close.

the maximum number of Weasleys in Hogwarts is five

The Milkybar

Chapter Summary

Five finger discount!

Spring term 1990

There was a *bang* like a gunshot, and Harry watched the pale blue light leave Jasmine's wand. He winced as it struck him in the chest, throwing him back onto a pile of cushions.

"Alright," Louis said as Harry clambered out of the fluffy pile. "Your turn."

Defense Against the Dark Arts was the worst class at Hogwarts, which was a shame as it was arguably the most important. Their teacher was a washed out ex-auror whose name no one could remember. Harry was fairly certain she'd never actually told them her name. It didn't really matter. Most of their learning happened at the unofficial Slytherin Defense Club, where upper years taught lower years in an endless cycle of defending against the dark arts. There were some dark arts involved as well, as you couldn't defend against something you didn't know about. Jinxes, hexes, minor curses. Things that were more annoying to be hit with than anything.

The Knockback Jinx was one such spell.

Harry pointed his wand at Jasmine, who braced herself.

"*Flipendo!*"

The spell hit Jasmine right over her heart, and she spun through the air before landing in her own pile of cushions.

"Well done," Louis said with mild interest. "Not many first-years can pull off a flip. Looks like you've got an aptitude for this."

Harry gave him a faint smile, then ducked as smoke shot across the room, quietly hit the wall, and began pooling against it.

"Let's work on the wand movement," Eliza said to Adrian, who was swinging his wand around and trying to get the smoke to stop.

Louis coughed. "That's a good lesson for you. Don't cast a spell you can't undo, unless you don't care about undoing it. For something like the Smokescreen Spell, it can be as bad for you as your opponent, especially if it backfires. Now, repeat after me. *Aeratio!*"

Harry copied him, swinging his wand in the air, and watched as the smoke dissipated.

“Does that work on other things?” Harry asked.

“It works best for dispelling airborne conjurations, since they’re made of magic,” Louis explained. “For naturally occurring fumes, vapors, and miasmas, you’re better off opening a window and using *ventus*, or vanishing it. But you might accidentally vanish all the air in the room, in which case...”

There was a sound of disgust from the corner of the common room. Harry looked up from *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* to watch the commotion. He had been wishing he had brought his copy of *Ten Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*, which was a much more comprehensive treatment, and filled with his mum’s notes on ingredient interactions.

A sixth-year boy was wiping a vile orange liquid from his face, having evidently lost a point in gobstones. It wasn’t the most popular game, given the tendency of being sprayed in the face with something horrible, but it had its adherents. Some were nearly as zealous as quidditch fans. Harry had got his own set of gobstones at Christmas, made out of a rather nice rutilated quartz, but had only played a few times. Most people preferred wizard’s chess, which was fine, but Harry got bored waiting for his opponent to make a move, and the chess pieces he borrowed had an attitude problem.

Harry marked the page he was on—leaping, skipping, and capering toadstools—and went to watch the game.

Other than the two people playing, there were only a few other students watching the match. One was a girl Harry thought was a fourth-year, who wore a badge with the letter G on it, made out of a black snake which occasionally stuck its tongue out or emitted a silent hiss.

The sixth-year boy braced his fist on the ground and flicked his bottle-washer, the biggest gobstone and the one filled with fluid, at the smaller stones in the circle. Harry was impressed when the gobstone the sixth-year had targeted shot out of the circle, while his bottle-washer spun in place. It slowed just enough to spray his opponent. He had successfully eliminated one of her gobstones.

The girl didn’t take it lying down. She grimly wiped the muck out of her eyes and leaned forward, placing her hand like a wolf claiming her prey. Her gobstone shot out like a bullet, ricocheting off one of her own stones and pushing it back into the cluster, pinging off another, then crashing into one of her opponent’s stones before spinning back.

Harry’s jaw dropped as not one, not two, but *three* gobstones were ejected from the circle. The sixth-year boy scowled as he was coated in more orange goo.

“These are the qualifying rounds for the interhouse tournament,” the girl with the badge said. She stuck out her hand. “Charity Lament, Slytherin Gobstones Captain.”

“Harry Evans,” he said, bemused as they shook hands.

“You’re that kid with the mouth thing,” Charity said, looking at his mouth. Harry obliged her by smiling. “Weird. Psychological warfare, I like it. Do you play gobstones?”

Exams were over, his trunk was packed, and Harry joined the crowd as they walked across the grounds one last time to take the carriages to Hogsmeade Station. He was surprised to see the carriages were not horseless as rumored, but hitched to thestrals. The shy creatures went unseen by the majority of students, and Harry decided it was best to pretend he couldn’t see them either. People would start asking questions, and he didn’t want to talk about watching his gran slowly die.

The train ride felt faster leaving Hogwarts than going to it, as if the magical world was eager to be rid of him. Harry wondered how his mum had felt returning to Cokeworth year after year, a paper telling her she couldn’t do magic over the summer burning a hole in her pocket. There had to be some way around it, since no one else in Slytherin seemed bothered by the ban. There was a law against underage magic, but he’d never got in trouble for all the magic he’d done before school. It was worth testing.

He and his fellow Slytherins—he wasn’t sure if they were friends, but it was hard to study, eat, and live with people for nine months without getting to know them—killed time with rounds of Exploding Snap, frantically slapping the deck of cards before it exploded, talking about summer plans (Harry had a total of *none*), and speculating about the next year.

Slytherin prefects stopped by, the Head Boy and Girl made one last round of the train, the trolley witch rolled past and Harry was the unfortunate center of attention as his friends kept trying to get him to eat things he couldn’t in an apparent effort to work out what his braces did. It reminded him he had to go to the dentist since he’d missed about a dozen appointments.

Too soon, the Hogwarts Express slowed to a stop at Kings Cross station. Harry waved goodbye to the people he knew, watching as they left with siblings, parents, and grandparents. Almost everyone had someone to pick them up, even the graduated seventh-years.

Harry kept his head down and dragged his trunk through the barrier and to a more mundane station platform, digging out some muggle money to pay for a ticket. Too soon, he was on the train that would carry him home.

The playground near Harry's house only had one mostly unbroken swing, which he claimed after the older boys had been run off by a passing patrol car. He backed up then lifted his legs, swinging out, kicking to propel himself higher. There wasn't much to see from that height, other than concrete and steel, the crumbling stacks belching smoke from the factories on the outskirts of town, the slouching brickwork of public housing.

Harry had made it a month before running out of muggle money. He had spent most of it buying new clothes. His mum had left dresses and skirts, his gran the same, and his grandad's clothing was too big for him.

The first thing he had tried upon arriving home was a simple cleaning charm to dispel the dust, and within half an hour he'd got an owl from the Ministry with a warning. The letter even said the exact spell he had used. It had scared him straight, and he didn't even try any of the wandless magic he'd done before Hogwarts. It wasn't worth getting expelled over.

The letter had said there had been a spell performed in his vicinity, but not naming him specifically. It made Harry wonder what happened if he did a spell in Diagon Alley, or if one of his friends did magic with a magical adult around. How would the Ministry know?

Harry jumped off the swing and floated to the ground. He looked around, worried that someone had seen. Then he checked the sky for owls. Frowning, Harry stuck his hands in his pockets and started walking into town.

It was his birthday.

He snuck into one of the local pubs first, where people were more interested in drinking themselves into a stupor than what a twelve-year-old boy was getting up to. He managed to swipe a pack of matches from a table before the bartender shouted at him to get out.

Harry really missed Hogwarts. Going from only having to worry about homework to having to worry about *everything* was exhausting. His dentist had not been pleased at him missing so many appointments. His braces were supposed to be adjusted every month or so, and not doing so meant he'd have to wear them for longer. At least *that* didn't cost him any money. He still had the galleons his mum had left him, but almost half had been spent on his wand, and he couldn't spend magical currency in the muggle world. He had to save what he had to buy supplies for the next school year.

He swung around the back of Tesco, but it was the middle of the day and the bins were mostly empty. Harry wasn't the only one who checked, so finding anything edible was hit or miss.

Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose. He knew from experience it was usually safer to steal from a big chain store, they expected some theft. Harry had never been caught. His picture wasn't posted in the store, he wasn't banned. Other shoplifters were not so fortunate.

Harry always tried to buy something to cover up any stealing he did, but this time he couldn't. He didn't have any money. He'd have to do some more pickpocketing when he went

to Diagon Alley. The pockets in Cokeworth largely consisted of lint.

Inside the store was oddly dark compared to outside. Half of the lights had dimmed or gone out completely. The floors were slightly tacky but that was easily ignored, as was the security guard whose eyes glazed over as Harry slipped into an aisle. He played with the matches in his pocket, wondering if he should just leave. He didn't feel that strongly about his birthday, though his gran had made a big deal out of it. It ought to be recognized with more than a stolen, half-empty pack of matches, for his gran's sake.

Going to Diagon Alley would have been a better idea than roaming Cokeworth. He *would* have gone, but it was Sunday and the bus didn't run. Harry was trapped.

He came to a stop in the bread aisle to drool over the fluffy loaves. Eventually, Harry gravitated towards the cheapest ones, but if he was stealing it may as well be something decent.

A new issue presented itself. Bread was bulky. He could hide it under baggy clothes, which he wasn't wearing, or in a bag, which he had left at home. All in all, this little heist could have been better planned. It would have been easy with magic. Everything was easier. Everything was better.

Harry *did* have his wand with him; it felt safer to carry it whether or not he was allowed to use it. He'd sewn a pocket inside of his coat to hide it, and his hand strayed towards his wand as he stared at the rows of bread.

He turned away, deciding to play it safe by nicking a chocolate bar. A Dairy Milk, or a Milkybar. No one would miss those. Harry sighed wearily and tucked the white chocolate into a pocket.

A hand fell heavily on his shoulder, and Harry froze. The entire world stopped. A strange buzz filled his body, crept along his skin. He'd finally been caught. They'd put a polaroid of him up with the others. He'd never been allowed through the doors again. He'd have to walk all the way to the next town to get groceries, or pay someone to shop for him. They'd want to call his parents.

It was the worst possible thing that could have happened. He could barely breathe.

"Mr. Evans," a deep, horribly familiar voice said. "Underage magic *and* petty theft. How bold of you. An aspiring criminal in two worlds."

Harry slowly looked over his shoulder and into the dark gaze of Professor Snape. His mouth was twisted with disdain, and he looked extraordinarily disappointed. Somehow, inexplicably, he was in Cokeworth.

"I haven't done any magic, sir," Harry said, confused. His hand was still on the Milkybar. It was particularly galling to be caught stealing something so trivial, but it wasn't as if he could shove an entire head of lettuce in his pocket.

Snape raised an eyebrow. “You haven’t? An accidental Disillusionment charm, how very interesting. That suggests you do this with some regularity.”

Harry blanched, swallowing drily. “Only when I don’t have money, sir.”

Snape gave him an unamused look. “Does your family not give you enough allowance? Are you so entitled as to believe you deserve things you haven’t earned?”

Harry looked off to the side. “I don’t have any family, sir.”

“And you do not live in a children’s home? I know of several in the area.”

“No,” Harry reluctantly admitted.

“Where *do* you live?”

Harry kept his mouth shut, avoiding Snape’s eyes.

After a moment, Snape said, “Very well. Follow me, Mr. Evans.”

Harry silently trailed after Snape, keeping his head down. “So they send professors when people do underage magic?”

“No, Mr. Evans. I can assure you our unfortunate meeting was pure coincidence.”

It was then Harry noticed Snape was carrying a basket. And wearing muggle clothes. He looked far less bat-like without his robes. Harry peeked into the basket, and was surprised at how mundane the contents were. Bread, eggs, cheese, tomatoes.

He was worried Snape would turn him in, but the man simply went through the check out, paid for his items, and left the store.

Harry still had the Milkybar in his pocket.

“Sir, I—”

“Quiet, you silly boy. We shall discuss your behavior in a less public setting.”

Not seeing he had much of a choice, Harry kept following Snape as they walked through Cokeworth. No one paid them much attention. He thought it must have been a spell, because even dressed as a muggle Snape was a distinctive presence. He didn’t walk, he *strode*, and had a bearing as if he were inherently superior to the rundown people they passed. He didn’t fit Cokeworth. Snape was an anomaly.

Harry thought he’d have a heart attack when they passed Spinner’s Circle, but Snape kept walking, only turning when they got to Spinner’s End. They passed row after row of shabby public housing, until Snape stopped in front of a house indistinguishable from the others. Then he got out a key and opened the door, and Harry realized with a start that it must have been Snape’s own home.

Harry cleared his throat. "How long have you lived in Cokeworth, sir?"

"Too long," Snape replied shortly. "Take a seat, Mr. Evans. I'll deal with you momentarily."

Harry wasn't sure where to sit. There was a single armchair next to the fire. Every other surface was covered with books. He could hear Snape moving around the kitchen. Not wanting to be caught ignoring an order, Harry sat on the floor next to a stack of books. Snape hadn't said to not look at anything, so Harry began reading the titles.

Snape returned to the room bearing a tray of tea. He took one look at Harry sitting on the floor, then turned the stack of books he had been perusing into a chair.

"Sit," Snape said, setting the tray on a small table.

Harry sat.

"Drink."

Harry picked up his cup of tea and drank. It was hot and bitter, and left an odd aftertaste in his mouth.

"Now tell me, Mr. Evans, where do you live?"

Harry opened his mouth, his house address on the tip of his tongue. He clamped his mouth shut, shocked by the sudden urge to reveal his secret.

"Cokeworth," he said tightly.

Snape stared at him. "Very well. What happened to your parents?"

Harry frowned, looking into the tea he was now very suspicious of. "Did you drug me?"

"Answer the question, Mr. Evans."

"They're dead," Harry said bluntly. "My mum died when I was eight. My grandad died in a factory accident."

He had almost slipped and called her *gran*. He set the cup of tea down.

"I see," Snape said, tapping the arm of his chair. "Are you aware, Mr. Evans, that Hogwarts offers an allowance to students such as yourself?"

Harry's head snapped up. "Really?"

Snape's eyes bored into him. Harry got the distinct impression his professor could read his mind. He was getting a slight headache.

"Yes," Snape said. "Had we been made aware of your...situation...you wouldn't feel the need to steal chocolate over the summer."

Harry blushed, the shame of being caught renewed. "I don't usually, it's just...it's my birthday. I'm almost out of muggle money."

"That does beg the question of *where* you get money," Snape said, still staring at him. "I shall have to contact the headmaster about arranging an allowance for you. It should be enough to see you through the year, if you spend it wisely."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said quietly, his head spinning with the turn of events.

"I do wonder how you managed to slip past us," Snape said idly. "Usually a professor is sent to introduce muggleborns to the magical world."

Harry shrugged. "Can you read minds?"

Snape watched him for a moment, then closed his eyes in a show of great patience. "It's called Legilimency, Mr. Evans. It is not something so inelegant as *mind reading*. The mind isn't a book one can page through. The counter to it is Occlumency. You appear to have some natural facility for the art, otherwise I wouldn't need to pry your secrets from you."

Harry eyed the cup again. "So you did drug me."

"Children are not as forthcoming as we often wish, to their own detriment," Snape said unapologetically. "I can assure you that I do not make a habit of this."

Harry looked at him skeptically. "If you say so. Am I in trouble?"

"No, Mr. Evans. Sadly, my authority only exists within the confines of Hogwarts. I have little interest in punishing recalcitrant students over the summer holiday, however richly they deserve it. It is enough that I am so heavily burdened during the school year."

"Great, so—"

"However," Snape continued, ignoring him, "do expect an owl from the headmaster, or more likely our deputy headmistress, regarding your financial situation. And as you are in my house, I do feel some modicum of responsibility over your circumstances. As such, if you would like to earn some...pocket change...I may find myself in need of an assistant. I shall expect you here at nine in the morning tomorrow."

Harry gulped. "Yes, sir."

"Now go," Snape said, leaning back in his chair. "I have no wish to subject myself to any more annoyance than necessary. If you feel the need to avail yourself of the local grocers, I advise you to avoid doing so in front of me."

With that, Harry swiftly saw himself out the door.

Severus watched Harry Evans scamper away, and kept looking at the door the boy had quickly shut behind him. He picked up the tea the boy had drunk, sniffing it delicately. It was only one drop of Veritaserum, just enough to get the boy talking, but he had been able to filter what came out. It was impressive, if concerning. A child that age should not have been able to develop such strong occlumency. Especially not a muggleborn.

The boy *was* a muggleborn, Severus was certain of that. And a poor one, too, though he had done well in trying to hide it. Better than Severus had, though to be fair he hadn't put much effort in those first few years, more interested in spending time with his friend in Gryffindor.

Severus sipped from his own unadulterated tea, mulling over the enigma of Harry Evans.

The name was painfully familiar, though the boy bore little resemblance to Lily. The same cadence, the same intelligence, the same awe at the magical world, though the boy made a Herculean effort to mask it. It was smart of him, helped him blend into Slytherin once the boy became aware of the house's reputation. There hadn't been a Slytherin raised in the muggle world since Severus himself.

And Harry Evans *was* smart, remarkably so. He had been the top of his class in every subject. Filius and Minerva praised the boy's easy facility with spellwork, Pomona his diligence in the greenhouse, Aurora the aesthetic of his star charts. He was a brilliant student, helpful to his peers, polite, perhaps a little too quiet. Severus had already been considering him as prefect material.

To discover such an admirable child spent his holiday stealing chocolates was a shock. It said more about Harry Evans and how he had grown up than anything else. To see him in Cokeworth, a place where magic came to die, had been...distressing.

There were a few Evans in town, though Severus couldn't immediately identify who the boy's parents might be. He looked nothing like Lily, nor Petunia, nor their parents, and his age and the boy's mother dying four years prior didn't match the information he had on *that* Evans family. It was a mystery.

Severus finished his tea, scowling as he thought about what kind of chores would keep a bored twelve-year-old out of trouble. The boy enjoyed potions, maybe he could help brew the stock for Poppy.

He rubbed his temple, grimacing at the headache that was building. One of his students living as a squatter. How the hell had they missed that?

Beetle Eyes

Chapter Summary

Back to school shopping :)

Summer 1990

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry stood in front of the rusted gate of Professor Snape's house, reconsidering his decision to turn up. He didn't know what would happen if he didn't. Something clattered loudly in a nearby alley, and Harry saw the tail of a fox streak out of sight. An owl swooped by, dropping a rolled up *Daily Prophet* on the stoop. He jumped when the door to the house creaked open.

"Loitering, Mr. Evans?" Snape asked, picking up the paper. "I believe the local magistrate already has a full docket of delinquency cases. We wouldn't want to add to that, would we?"

"No, sir," Harry said, opening the gate and hastily shutting it behind him. He kept his head down as he entered the house. It was as dim and cramped as the day before, like stepping into a cave. Harry was still impressed by the number of books, and though he wanted to ask he doubted his professor would let him borrow any. They were probably jinxed worse than the ones in the Hogwarts' library.

There were a lot of rumors about Professor Snape. That he was secretly a vampire, which was easily debunked given the lack of blood drinking and being sighted on the grounds in full daylight. That he was fascinated with the dark arts, obsessed even. But that was a rumor about every Slytherin. It was common knowledge that Voldemort had been a Slytherin, though no one knew when he had gone to Hogwarts, or what his name was before Voldemort. And most of the known Death Eaters were from Slytherin.

Harry ran his tongue over his braces. There were some whispers about him too, about his braces, about being top of his class. If he had been in any other house, like Ravenclaw, Harry doubted he'd get any attention at all.

"Don't dawdle, Mr. Evans," Snape said, moving towards a door that appeared out of nowhere. "Madam Pomfrey has quite the list for us to get through before the school year begins."

The door opened to a narrow set of stairs. Harry slowly followed Snape down.

"Professor?"

“Yes, Mr. Evans?”

“I’m not allowed to do magic outside of school.”

“I am perfectly aware of that, Mr. Evans,” Snape said drily. “You’ll gain no points for stating the obvious. Indeed, I am incapable of deducting points when away from school grounds.”

“Isn’t potions magic?” Harry asked.

They paused in front of another door, this one made of stone. Snape took his wand out, tapping the stones while muttering under his breath. The door silently rose out of the floor, retracting into the ceiling. They stepped into a well-appointed potions lab, far less dungeon-like than the ones at school. It was well-lit, the air wasn’t saturated with noxious fumes, the walls were lined with organized shelves packed with tools and ingredients.

Snape walked to one of the tables and picked up a roll of parchment.

“You’ll find that the Trace operates in a rather restricted manner,” Snape said, unrolling the parchment. “It does not know who has cast a spell, only when one has been cast in close proximity to an underage witch or wizard. The operative term being *cast*. Any adult witch or wizard nearby will cause the Trace to *not* be triggered.”

“So I can do potions,” Harry concluded. “And pretty much anything besides using my wand?”

“That’s the general idea, Mr. Evans,” Snape said, setting the parchment down and walking towards one of the cabinets. “As you may have deduced, the Trace is truly only an obstacle to muggleborn students, as they are the most likely to inadvertently breach the Statute of Secrecy. Fetch the alicorn, Mr. Evans. It needs to be ground into a fine powder.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, hurrying to obey. “What are we making?”

“Today, Blood-Replenishing Potion. Hogwarts is playing the unfortunate host to a breeding pair of manticores next year, courtesy of Professor Kettleburn and his NEWT Care of Magical Creatures course. Madam Pomfrey is expecting a spate of gorings.”

Harry easily found the unicorn horn. It cast a prismatic glow, and when he touched it he felt strangely at peace. Normally they worked with shavings from the horns. A whole one was unprecedented.

“Sir?”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Evans,” Snape said, setting the jars and vials he collected on the table. “The alicorn was given willingly, collected by Hagrid after the spring moltings. The potency of unicorn parts diminishes when handled by those whom the unicorns deem less worthy. Children are uniquely suited to preparing such ingredients. Despite your proclivity for pilfering, the magic does take *intent* into consideration. In other words, should someone use so-called dark magic for a good cause, the latent magic of the unicorn will recognize that.”

Harry nodded, then located a large mortar and pestle, as well as a silver knife to begin shaving the alicorn to make it easier to grind. He was careful to keep it over the mortar so no material was lost. He set the alicorn aside and began grinding the flakes with the pestle.

Snape glanced at his work, making no comment. A ringing endorsement.

“After that, you’ll need to blanch the mandrake skins.”

“Yes, professor.”

Harry left Professor Snape’s house thoroughly confused and with a fiver clutched in his hand. They had worked through lunch, where Harry was made to join Snape for soup while his professor complained about children not feeding themselves properly, then they spent the early afternoon decanting the potion into bottles for the hospital wing, and labeling them so *some idiot student wouldn’t mistake it for pumpkin juice*.

He didn’t know what his professor was thinking. Despite his grumbling and generally unpleasant demeanor, Snape was being *nice*. There was no reason for him to go out of his way for Harry. Maybe it was the annoyance of seeing a student nicking things from the local shops. Maybe doing underage magic would get Snape in trouble, and keeping an eye on Harry was the best way to avoid it.

Harry was still reeling from having seen one of his teachers in Cokeworth, and knowing he wasn’t the only person with magic around. Cokeworth simply wasn’t a place where magical things happened.

Harry walked through town, kicking away trash that blew across his path, thinking about how to best spend his money.

A teenager rolled by on a squeaking bicycle with a radio strapped to the handlebars, blasting music. The speakers crackled with how loud the girl had cranked it. Harry could barely make out the words. She flipped him off as she peddled past.

Harry kept his head down and continued walking.

Snape was reading the *Daily Prophet* at the kitchen table, the remains of lunch spread between them.

Harry kept glancing at the paper. He hadn’t read any magical news in ages. He had no idea what was going on in wizarding Britain. That day, he saw the *Prophet* had done a full spread

for his brother's tenth birthday. The front page had a picture of a small, black-haired baby with vivid green eyes and a livid scar on his forehead, blinking owlshly at the photographer. Harry wondered who had taken a picture of Monty right after Voldemort had killed their mum, then tried to kill him. It was in poor taste. It made Harry's heart ache, for the family neither of them would ever have.

Snape turned a page, and Harry nibbled on a biscuit while trying to decipher the empty words the author had said about the heroic baby who had been hidden from the world.

"Bored, Mr. Evans?"

Harry jerked back, embarrassed at being caught. "Sorry, sir. I don't get the *Prophet* delivered. Two sickles an issue is..."

Snape took out his wand, and Harry watched as he summoned the previous day's issue and deposited in front of Harry. Harry picked it up, glancing at his teacher.

"It's important to stay abreast of current events," Snape said. "There's no need for you to go digging around for news in a bin, though I dare say it is appropriate surrounds for many... articles. You may have this copy when I'm finished with it."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, reading the previous day's headline. "There's going to be a new minister?"

Snape sighed. "I suppose I should have expected some conversation. Yes, Mr. Evans. Minister Bagnold's term is up, though many have clamored for her to retain her position due to the Dark Lord being defeated under her otherwise unremarkable reign."

Harry frowned, both at Snape's choice of name for Voldemort, and at Voldemort's defeat being attributed to the minister.

"But that has nothing to do with her," Harry said. "Volde—"

"Don't say his name," his professor snapped.

"Sorry," Harry said, shrinking back a little. "The...Dark Lord? It was Monty Potter who killed him."

His professor snorted derisively. "So we have been led to believe. A piece of wisdom for you, Mr. Evans. What the wizarding world lacks in logic it makes up for in gullibility."

Harry puzzled over his words as he looked at an animated advertisement for the new Twigger 90, *for the witch or wizard with more money than sense*.

Snape sneered at the ad. "Thinking about squandering your allowance on a new broom?"

Harry shook his head. "No, sir. Madam Hooch says we can borrow the school brooms. She's got an old Moontrimmer that still has most of its enchantments." He hesitated, then added, "It's important to know how to fly."

Snape regarded him coolly. “To fit in better with your peers?”

Harry nodded.

“Understandable. I’m sure Diagon Alley will be packed with your classmates slaving over the latest flying stick.” He looked searchingly at Harry. “How do you plan on traveling to Diagon Alley to purchase your supplies?”

“I was going to take the train,” Harry said.

Snape pinched his nose. “I understand why you might not want to use the Knight Bus. It is perhaps the most ill-advised integration of muggle technology our world has seen, not to mention the obscene cost they demand. You *are* aware my home has a floo connection?”

“I am,” Harry said, glancing at the large fireplace.

“Did you think to *ask* to use it, or did you intend to trainhop to London like a vagabond?”

“I could have bought a ticket this time,” Harry said, blushing slightly.

“*This time*,” Snape muttered. “Use the floo, Mr. Evans. On second thought, I shall accompany you. I’d never hear the end of it if you got stuck in a chimney, or something equally moronic.”

Harry stepped carefully out of the Leaky Cauldron’s fireplace, trying to brush ashes from his clothes but only making it worse. Snape looked at the streaks of grey marring Harry’s clothing, sighed, and waved his wand to vanish it.

“Thank you,” Harry said, looking around the busy pub. He heard the floo flare up behind him, and hurried out of the way.

The radio was playing, tuned to the Quidditch World Cup. Scotland against Canada. The Leaky Cauldron was in an uproar, Hogwarts alumni worked into a frenzy as Scotland scored another goal.

“Let us not linger,” Snape said, striding through the crowded pub and to the brick wall, tapping the correct stone. It was the second time Harry had seen Diagon Alley manifest before his eyes, but it was no less marvelous. Going from a dreary day in London to a slightly less dreary day in London plus magic was absolutely delightful.

“I need to put in an order with various apothecaries,” Snape said as they walked, parting the crowd like a shark cutting through a school of fish. “But first, I need to draw from the school’s line of credit with Gringotts. I could purchase it myself and submit a request to be reimbursed, but such requests often find themselves at the bottom of a stack of paper. You have your promissory note?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, reaching into his pocket. He had got an owl from Professor McGonagall letting him know he had a fifty galleon allowance. It was the most money he had ever had access to, and he didn’t even need to use most of it since he already had the books for that year, and all years going forward. But he could get better potions ingredients, and proper shoes, and plenty of parchment.

At Gringotts, Harry handed the promissory note to the teller, who asked him if he wanted any deposited into his vault. Luckily, Snape was busy with another teller and didn’t overhear. He had a habit of asking Harry seemingly innocuous questions which revealed more than Harry intended. It was a very Slytherin thing to do, treating conversation as some elaborate verbal competition. Harry noticed it sometimes when he overheard the upper years say things that didn’t match their expressions. Though not everyone talked like they had stepped out of murder ballad, and some who did weren’t as clever as they thought they were. Harry couldn’t always parse the conversations of the older students, more often than not they would shoo away any eavesdroppers, but he was familiar with misdirection, half-truths, and outright lies. He’d been doing the same since the very beginning.

Once out of Gringotts, Snape left Harry to his own devices, agreeing to meet at the Leaky Cauldron later. Harry breathed a sigh of relief, glad his professor wouldn’t see what he *didn’t* buy. It would have been hard to explain why he already had some of the required supplies. Harry had several excuses to choose from—having bought the books last year, a seventh year leaving him their old things—but didn’t want to strain credulity or have it fall apart if Snape decided to investigate.

Most shops had the Quidditch World Cup playing on the wireless, and Harry was able to talk a few of them into lowering prices. Diagon Alley was relatively quiet due to the game, and sales were slow, so most were willing to make a deal. Madam Malkin seemed taken with him, fussing as she fitted him for his robes and uniform. His mum’s uniform had skirts, which, while Harry wasn’t entirely against wearing such attire, would have definitely made him stand out. At least in Hogwarts. Wizards outside of school had much more liberal fashion. Harry was treated to a tedious monologue on the latest in magical couture as Madam Malkin talked at him about her time at the *Which Witch?* fashion show in Paris.

A whirlwind of shops later, encumbered by his bulky purchases, Harry physically ran into Professor Snape outside of Slug & Jiggers Apothecary.

“Mr. Evans,” Snape said, taking out his wand. “Did you neglect to ask the proprietors to shrink your purchases for you?”

“I’m allowed to do that?” Harry asked, watching as his items turned miniature. He stared at the little piles in his hands, then put it all in his pockets. “Thank you, sir.”

“Leaving your potions ingredients for last?” Snape asked, scowling at the apothecary’s door. “Don’t bother. There is apparently a shortage of beetle eyes and other arthropod appendages. The muggles have been more vigorous in their usage of pesticides.”

Harry looked at the apothecary next door, Mr. Mulpepper’s. A large sign in the window declared that they didn’t sell unicorn blood, urging customers not to ask about it. It was odd they went out of their way to tell people they *didn’t* traffic in illegal creature parts.

“I’ve already checked in there,” Snape said. “There is another shop, off the beaten path as it were. Follow me, Mr. Evans. Do not stray, do not touch anything, and do not speak to anyone. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, following close behind as Snape stalked away from the apothecaries. They walked back towards Gringotts, but Snape turned down a narrow street. It was marked by a crooked, weathered sign that read *Knockturn Alley*.

The alley twisted and turned, darkening as the buildings grew close, their roofs tipped together as if sharing secrets. There were a lot of people around, more than in Diagon Alley. Witches and wizards in tattered and stained robes, some sitting on the street, others smoking and gossiping around bubbling cauldrons and charmed fires. A hag stared at him with her one eye, the other a scabrous pit, and gave him a gap-toothed smile. He smiled back, just to be polite, and she flinched, making an odd sign with her gnarled hands. Harry’s cheeks warmed as he realized his braces must have startled the old woman.

Harry felt strangely at ease in Knockturn Alley. Unlike the sparkling brilliance of Diagon Alley, where whimsy was all but shoved down your throat, the people here felt familiar. Poor, run down, working class, malcontents. If Cokeworth were a magical village, it would be indistinguishable from Knockturn Alley.

Harry had always believed that magic would be his salvation, his freedom. But it was obvious that simply having magic didn’t elevate you, even if magic could literally do such a thing.

There were plenty of children too, though Harry didn’t recognize any from Hogwarts. He caught a flash of amber eyes and understood. Werewolf children. Dhampir, half-vampire half-human children. Other non-human people who had magic but were denied the use of wands.

“Professor,” Harry started.

“Silence,” Snape said in a low voice. “You’ll do them no favors by sticking your nose in where it is unwanted.”

Harry swallowed and kept his mouth shut. He saw a flash of bright orange and turned to regard a chubby red-haired woman accompanied by two boys. Harry recognized them as the older Weasleys from school. Charlie the seeker, who seemed to have inherited his bulky stature from his mother, and Percy, a gawky boy with horn-rimmed glasses who came off as rather aloof. The mother had a harried look about her, fussing over her sons as she picked over bins in front of a secondhand robe store. Charlie was smiling, completely at ease, while Percy had his mouth set in a grim line.

Snape picked up the pace, hurrying past the family, while Harry kept his head down, hoping not to be recognized. He wasn’t ashamed of being poor, and it wasn’t that embarrassing to be seen with a teacher over the holiday. Who would the Weasleys tell anyway? Harry doubted they even knew his name. For all they knew he was a first-year one of the professors was showing around. And he doubted they wanted anyone to know their clothes came from a charity shop in Knockturn Alley.

It wasn't just that it was the poor part of town. The deeper they went, the more Harry got the impression there was, for lack of a better word, a darker element. There were shops filled with menacing artifacts, and Snape's warning to not touch anything replayed in his mind. There were beings the Ministry labeled as *dark*. Bored vampires, exhausted werewolves, banshees whose throats glowing with runes to silence them. Harry was fairly certain one elderly beggar had snakes for hair, considering the large and writhing hat he wore. The harpies were perhaps the most alarming, people with wings instead of arms and claws instead of feet, completely naked and utterly indifferent to it. They were much smaller than Harry had expected, perhaps the size of a large dog. He watched a female one plunge towards the street and soar back up, pumping her wings to reach a roof where she tore apart the rat she had caught with her unusually sharp teeth.

When they finally stopped walking, Harry was utterly lost. He looked up at the shop sign and was bemused to find it was called Mr. Mulpepper's.

"Is it the same shop?" Harry asked, noting that it did look almost exactly like the one in Diagon Alley. It even had the same sign about unicorn blood.

"It is, in a sense," Snape said. "This is the Knockturn Alley entrance. Stay close, and, again, *do not touch anything*."

Harry nodded, his eyes darting around the store as he pulled the door closed behind him. He worried for a moment that this counted as touching something, but Snape didn't comment. They navigated the narrowly spaced shelves to the abandoned counter at the back of the store. Snape vigorously rang the bell resting on it, and it made a sound like a thousand dying cats.

"What do you want?" a voice growled. A hunched woman wearing a shawl hobbled out of the back. "Oh, it's you. Well, out with it!"

Harry played with the elastic bands of his braces, careful not to stretch them too far, as he looked around the apothecary. There were all sorts of strange animal and plant parts. Flasks of putrid yellow bile from armadillos, hedgehogs, and porcupines. A small pyramid of shriveled bezoars, kept locked in a case radiating hostile magic. Pints of blood from an uncountable variety of creatures, including human to Harry's surprise. Then again, not everyone doing magic had ready access to human blood by way of their own body. There were tufts of kneazle hair, cat hair, hippogriff hair. Barrels of cockroaches, lice, ants. Herbs and feathers hung from the ceiling in bundles. The shop was dark and cold, to better preserve the ingredients, and had an undefinable smell. Herbal and musky, erratic with the magic clashing from the myriad ingredients.

"Your list," Snape said, with the tone of someone repeating himself.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, quickly removing his folded supply list from his pocket. The old woman snatched it away, then vanished.

"Did they have the beetle eyes?" Harry asked.

"They will," Snape said.

“I’ll pop the bloody things out myself if I have to,” the woman said, limping back with packets and vials and jars. She thrust Harry’s list back at him, and he took it while looking over what she had brought. He double checked that everything was there.

“You finished?” the woman said wryly. “Five galleons, eight sickles for the lot, child.”

Harry kept his face blank as he got out his money. That was far less than he had expected to pay. One of the potions they learned second year required puffer-fish eyes, which were ten galleons a gram.

“Thank you,” Harry said as the woman all but clawed the coins from his hand.

“Thank your professor, child. He’s been coming to us since *he* was in Hogwarts, and it’s good business now he’s placing orders for the whole castle!”

Harry glanced at Snape, who was unmoved by this pronouncement. “Thank you, sir.”

“There’s no use in teaching potions with cheap tools and expired ingredients,” Snape said. “Your understanding of the theory is too underdeveloped to navigate the nuance of such interactions, nor are you skilled enough to make the appropriate alterations to the brewing process. If anything, I am merely preempting an inevitable disaster.”

“Okay,” Harry said, smiling slightly. “Uh, miss? Could you shrink these for me? *Can* they be shrunk?”

The old woman grinned at him. “Clever, this one.”

Snape looked...approving. It was an expression Harry had never seen on the man. “Making physical alterations may have unintended consequences. Again, you lack the theoretical grounding to account for such things. You shall carry them as is.”

The old woman was already putting Harry's purchases in a bag for him. Harry thanked her again as he took it, then listened as Snape confirmed his own order.

“I shall expect your owl,” he said, signing a piece of paper and passing it back. “Half now, half on delivery.”

“Deal,” the woman said, snapping her fingers. The writing on the paper flashed, then the paper rolled itself up and flew off. “I’ll send the invoice with the first shipment.”

Snape nodded, spun around, and walked out of the store. Harry waved goodbye to the apothecary lady and hurried after.

Chapter End Notes

The bicycle girl was listening to [Nirvana's 1990 Peel session](#)

Brain Fish

Chapter Summary

Fall term 1990, winter term 1991

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Charity Lament's robes were getting crowded. A prefect's badge had joined her gobstones captain's badge, though she really didn't need to wear the latter.

For the first two weeks of school Harry had looked at the club sign up sheet in the common room and walked past without adding his name. The other second-years were already joining clubs and teams. Astrid, Terence, Cassius, and Adrian were all trying out for quidditch. Jasmine was joining Charms Club and the house Art Club, and Phoebe was trying out for the Frog Choir. Prefects and other upper years kept making allusions to CVs and extracurricular activities. They all still had the house Defense club, which was honestly just defense class, but with the added routine of electing officers in the name of legitimacy.

Harry wasn't very interested in drawing, or singing. He liked charms, but was better at learning on his own than in a group. He wasn't interested in quidditch, even though he readily agreed to fly whenever Astrid or Cassius asked him. He didn't want to collect and trade Chocolate Frog cards, or spend hours learning wizard's chess strategy, and while he liked magical creatures he didn't like them enough to endlessly talk about them. He *did* like gobstones, and he was rather good at it. He wouldn't have to invest that much time if he joined the team.

"So," Charity said from his side, nudging her captain's badge. "You've finally decided."

Harry looked at the quill in his hand, and the ink running down his wrist as he hesitated. "I have," he said, writing his name on the sign up sheet.

Charity snatched the parchment off the wall. "Great. Meetings are Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday after dinner and before Astronomy."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "That's...often."

"We need to get you up to speed. You and this first year, Killian Avery." Charity narrowed her eyes. "I was hoping for the Carrow twins. Their aunt and uncle were demons on the gobstones field."

"Field?" Harry looked at the two first-year girls, who were sitting on a couch reading a magazine together. "Maybe we can do an exhibition. Generate interest."

Charity smiled at him. It was a little scary. “Brilliant. I had a feeling about you, Evans. Hidden depths. Still waters run deep, as they say. Kids like shiny things. A bunch of magpies.”

“Right,” Harry said, backing away from the fanatical light in Charity’s eyes.

“I’ve got rounds right about”—she checked her watch—“fifteen minutes ago. We’ll talk more at our first meeting.”

“But it’s Monday,” Harry said, watching Charity grab the other fifth year prefect and hurtling out of the common room.

There was a commotion at the door, and after a moment Astrid stormed in, still wearing her quidditch leathers. There were noises of complaint as mud splattered onto the carpets.

“The house-elves will clean it!” she snapped, throwing herself angrily at a couch. She took off her helmet and gripped it in her hands. Her short hair stuck out wildly. Harry cautiously approached her. When he got close, he noticed her eyes were red-rimmed.

“Tryouts didn’t go well?” Harry asked carefully.

“I’m on the reserve team,” Astrid said glumly, staring at her helmet. “It’s Rosier’s last year, same with half the team. We’ll probably be on the primary team next year.”

“We?”

“Me, Adrian, and Cassius,” she said, wiping her nose. “Terence made seeker. It was the only open position.”

“You’ll still get to practice with the team, right?” Harry asked.

“Yeah,” she replied, sniffing. She blinked her tears away, then looked around in surprise at the mud she’d got everywhere. “I forgot to change.”

“Maybe you should go back?”

Astrid clenched her jaw and nodded. “Right,” she said, standing up. “I’m still on the team. I can train with everyone. I’ll be keeper next year.”

She left without another word, hurrying back to the team’s changing room. People were glaring at the mess Astrid had left behind, so Harry took the opportunity to use some of the cleaning charms he knew. He could have called for a house-elf, but he was uncomfortable with the whole house-elf thing. They would probably reclean everything when everyone was asleep anyway.

Phoebe was curled over the *Daily Prophet*, pushing away her breakfast to work on the Sunday three-dimensional Runok Ko. Unlike the daily two-dimensional ones, the Sunday edition was a projection, sort of like a hologram, of an irregular shape made of blocks, which Phoebe used her wand to manipulate, occasionally filling the blocks with various symbols.

It was fascinating, and Harry had no idea how she was solving it.

Harry really wanted to ask, but it seemed like one of those things people who grew up in the magical world just knew.

One of the first-years had no such reservations. It was Killian Avery, a pureblood from an affluent family, and his gobstones partner. Harry kept his eyes on his own copy of the *Prophet*, which he'd summoned to himself after a seventh-year had left it at the table. It was opened to the obituary of Pollux Black, survived by four grandchildren, two in Azkaban, a grandson who had disappeared in 1979, and two great-grandchildren.

"What's that?" Killian asked. From the corner of his eye, Harry watched the first-year point at a group of looping symbols.

"It's Burmese," Phoebe said. "It helps to be multilingual for these, even if it's only a few words. Usually it's Latin, French, Mandarin, Old Norse, Ancient Greek, you know. Sometimes they'll throw in something like Urdu or Nahuatl, just to mix things up."

Phoebe poked the collection of blocks, which presumably spelled a word in Burmese, and they glowed with lavender light.

Harry turned a page, pretending to be interested in the articles on the Minister candidates. They had been running ads for weeks, and someone always brought a wireless into the common room to listen to the debates. Harry was mildly interested, but it wasn't like he had any say in who got to be Minister.

Once in a while—sometimes multiple times a day—Harry was made keenly aware of how many differences there were between him and his peers. Knowing too much about the muggle world and too little about the magical one was the most glaring, of course. Harry listened and read obsessively in order to pave over the gaps in his knowledge. It was more than not knowing how to solve a puzzle in the paper. He could always check the library, or ask Professor Snape, for the rules. It was him not having the prerequisite knowledge to solve it. Phoebe apparently knew Burmese, and perhaps other languages. He had heard Felix Rosier and Graham Montague speaking French. Latin was popular too, since many incantations borrowed heavily from Latin. Latin, and dozens of other languages.

Harry took a steadying breath. Charity had been working him to the bone on his bottle-washer technique. Classic gobstones was *all* bottle-washer technique. Harry dreamed of spinning gobstones. He wanted to stay at the top of his class, and he had already been accused of acting like a Ravenclaw on account of his study habits. He was well ahead on the material as it was, having gone through all of the second year books during summer.

He wished there was some magical way to increase the hours in a day, or to memorize things. If there was, Harry was sure everyone would be doing it. Maybe there *was* and it was too

dangerous, or too illegal. Messing with his brain sounded like a facially bad idea. He had tried to find some books on Legilimency and Occlumency, but the library had none. Or it was in the Restricted Section. He knew he could ask Professor Snape about it, but his head of house was busy teaching, brewing potions for the hospital wing, *and* had his head of house duties. Snape had already gone out his way to help Harry over the summer, he didn't want to take advantage of the man.

Harry set the paper down and picked up his tea, brow furrowed in thought. He'd have to teach himself. There was no other way.

"What are you thinking so hard about?" Adrian asked, nudging him.

Harry took a sip of his tea to avoid responding right away. "I need to brush up on some languages."

"You too?" Adrian said.

Harry looked at him, trying to mask his surprise.

"My dad's been complaining about my Russian," Adrian admitted, looking chagrined. "He refused to talk to me in English all summer. It was a nightmare. I tried telling him I wanted to go flying, but I said I wanted to become a bat."

Harry smiled into his tea, listening as his friends complained about their own language struggles. He had never considered asking any of them for help, and now felt like a git for not doing so. They knew he was an orphan, so perhaps it wasn't strange he wasn't fluent in a dozen languages already. And it turned out most of his peers weren't either. Like Phoebe, who knew some Burmese because her grandmother spoke it. Or Astrid, who had been learning Scottish Gaelic from her uncle before he died, and had stopped altogether after that. Adrian, who tried to speak Russian at home. Jasmine, who knew French and Creole from her mother who grew up in Guadeloupe. Terence made a face of disgust at speaking anything other than English, though incantations were an exception for some obscure reason. Cassius, who made them all laugh when he started naming things in German.

There were magical languages too. Mermish, parseltongue, Gobbledegook, Troll, and many others spoken by magical beings, all with different dialects. Some couldn't be spoken by humans, but they *could* be understood.

When breakfast was over, and half his friends trooped off to quidditch practice, Harry felt much lighter. The pressure that had been building up to learn more, learn faster, had abated. He was only twelve, and everyone around him was a student too. If someone like Terence didn't care about only speaking one language, it couldn't have been that big of a deal. Who cared if he didn't know the rules of Runok Ko yet? It wasn't possible for someone to know *everything*.

Still, Harry really did want to learn another language. Or several others. He knew incantations were important for many types of magic. The words looked like nonsense to him, but they *meant* something. They brought something into existence. The *how* and *why* eluded him. He wanted to know why *expelliarmus* worked but *disarm* didn't.

Harry said goodbye to Jasmine and Phoebe at the common room entrance. He ventured deeper into the dungeons, deciding that asking his head of house for advice on studying wouldn't annoy the man *too* much.

The first quidditch game of the season, Gryffindor against Slytherin as tradition dictated, suspiciously coincided with election day. Most of the students weren't aware of this fact, or knew and didn't care. Only those over seventeen could vote, and the absentee ballots had been owled days ago.

There was a despondent air about the professors' stand. Snape looked particularly agitated, scowling at the Gryffindor players as if he could set them on fire with his mind. Perhaps he could. Professor Sinistra had an unusually fierce expression when Lucian Bole aimed a bludger at Charlie Weasley's face. The Gryffindor team was Weasley heavy, since the twins Fred and George had got picked for beaters. Their synchronization was causing havoc. The headmaster was chatting amicably with Hagrid, while Professor McGonagall looked like she was going to eat her own hat.

Harry turned back to the game just in time to see Terence take the snitch from right under Charlie's nose.

It had been a slaughter. The commentator, the same Hufflepuff girl Nymphadora Tonks, had changed her hair into lanky black strands and had somehow conjured a rain cloud above herself as she wailed at Gryffindor's 470 point loss. It was staggering.

"They aren't coming back from that," Phoebe said, pulling Harry up. He hadn't quite realized everyone around him was standing and shouting at the top of their lungs. He smiled as the team did a victory lap. Once they landed, Terence was lifted onto Viridia's shoulders, waving the snitch around. His friends on the reserve team joined them, ignoring the shrill sound of Madam Hooch's whistle.

It was intoxicating, being around so many ecstatic people. Harry had never really been a part of anything bigger than himself. He was twelve. But he could certainly see the appeal. He was happy because his friends were happy. It was important to him because it was important to them. He looked at the professor's stand again, just in time to see Snape's smug expression as he shook McGonagall's hand. Tonks was still crying into her bullhorn, but the triumphant Slytherins drowned her out. No one even cared how the other houses were reacting. They had won!

Their mood wasn't even soured when the *Evening Prophet* declared Cornelius Fudge the new Minister for Magic. At least he was better than Crouch.

“What is it this time, Mr. Evans?”

Harry took the seat across from Professor Snape, at the round table that dominated his office. There was a cauldron, though under it the flames burned an icy blue, emitting a chill that sunk into Harry’s bones. There were scales, too, and racks of vials with various liquids, some swirling, some boiling, others moving like sentient sludge. The walls were packed with jars and jugs. A stuffed reptile stared at Harry with ruby eyes.

“I need to go to the dentist, sir.”

Snape wove his fingers together, his eyes boring into Harry. “The term is nearly over, Mr. Evans. Why are you only mentioning this now?”

Harry looked at his lap. “I wasn’t sure what to do. I’m supposed to go every six weeks.”

Snape kept staring at him. “I’m disappointed, Mr. Evans. I was under the impression you took your own health seriously. Clearly, I was mistaken.”

“It’s not that!” Harry said, looking up again. “I just don’t...I usually go by myself. I don’t have...”

Snape gave him a blank look. “I can assure you both myself and Madam Pomfrey are perfectly capable of escorting a student to a muggle doctor. As your head of house I am uniquely positioned to approve of off-campus escapades. I shall need to submit a request to the headmaster, but as this is related to your health, and the headmaster is well known for his...admiration of muggle...adaptations...it should be no issue.”

Harry looked down again. “I have to call them to reschedule the appointments I missed.”

There was a long moment of silence. Harry glanced up and saw his professor pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Very well,” Snape finally said. “I’ll have to open the floo to Spinner’s End. We can make your dental arrangements using the telephone box in town.”

Harry ran his tongue thoughtfully over his braces. It was a bad habit, but not one he anticipated giving up. He’d likely keep doing it even after his braces were taken off.

The dentist hadn’t been too upset, understanding that being in a boarding school didn’t allow for frequent check-ups. Harry had even managed to get an appointment with her shortly after the Christmas holiday started. He opted for green-colored bands this time, feeling that he should show some house spirit. Winning that first quidditch game had really set the tone for the rest of the year. He felt a bit pressured into earning points in class, but he already did then

whenever he was called upon to answer a question, or when he was the first to perform a spell successfully.

What he was thinking about now was how the food placed around him at meals had slowly begun to change. There wasn't anything chewy, or sticky, or crunchy, or stringy. There were soft things. Soups and mashed vegetables, pastas and cheeses. The things he was allergic to, peanuts and shellfish, were kept well away if not absent completely. He hadn't even told anyone about his allergies. It was a mystery.

Though, he *had* gone into anaphylactic shock on Halloween after biting into a chocolate filled with peanuts. There had been many tests in the hospital wing afterwards, and Madam Pomfrey clearly had connected the dots. Harry was so used to not having things he couldn't eat around that when something unfamiliar appeared he didn't instinctively treat it with caution. It had been a deadly lesson, and had scared the hell out of everyone. His friends were still convinced someone had tried to poison him in retaliation for Slytherin leading the House Cup.

Harry quietly ate his mashed potatoes, feeling awkward at once again being one of the handful of students staying at the castle for Christmas. It was him, the keeper for the Gryffindor quidditch team Oliver Wood, and a mix of fifth and seventh-year Ravenclaws. And some of their professors, of course, though only the headmaster, Hagrid, and Professor Snape.

Harry had got a number of presents that year. Mostly books, but also some sweets his friends had, by trial and error, determined he both liked and could eat. He worked out how to owl order things to send to his friends, chocolates and small trinkets he could afford. Six people were a lot to buy gifts for. He got another anonymous gift, too. A new hat that kept his ears warm.

Oliver Wood was surprisingly friendly, considering the horrendous loss which had traumatized him. He held out a cracker for Harry to pull, and after the storm-colored smoke cleared, Harry was left holding an odd yellow fish.

A few of the Ravenclaws gasped.

"That's a babelfish," one said, putting her elbow in the cranberry sauce as she leaned forward to look. "I didn't think they were real."

"Of course they're real," the girl next to her said. "They're merely incredibly, notoriously, preposterously rare!"

The fish flopped in Harry's hand, then rose into the air and circled his head.

"How extraordinary," the headmaster said, smiling broadly. "To be chosen by a babelfish!"

Harry watched the fish as it swam by, wondering what on earth it did.

"People have gone to war over that," a Ravenclaw said, rather alarmingly.

“People have gone to war *because* of that,” said another. The Ravenclaws then began a debate Harry didn’t bother to follow.

The babelfish sort of looked like a goldfish, except it was bright yellow and had a large puckering mouth, and red eyes that were eerily darting around. It also was swimming in the air, which goldfish generally did not do.

Harry liked it.

“Are we to assume this is yet another exception to the owl-toad-cat rule?” Snape asked in a bored tone.

“I dare say so, Severus,” the headmaster said, still smiling. Hagrid was blearily watching the babelfish circle Harry, seemingly at a loss for words. Harry heard Hagrid was the one responsible for wrangling the manticores after Professor Kettleburn lost the rest of his leg to one at the start of the term. The large man—not a giant, he wasn’t nearly tall enough—was enamored with the strange yellow fish.

“It’s not really a pet, is it?” Hagrid said, belching to emphasize his point. “Babelfish don’t properly eat since they live off those brain what’s-its, and they look after themselves. She’ll swim off when she wants.”

“Eloquently put, as always,” Snape drawled, looking over at Harry. “Indeed, that poor fish will inevitably discover a paucity of ideas within these learned halls.”

The headmaster dangled a cracker in front of Snape’s face. “Perhaps we can give it some food for thought, my dear boy?”

Oliver had, somewhat anticlimactically, got a voucher for *Keeper’s Quarterly*. However, he looked positively chuffed by it, and had located a quill to fill out the order form. He did take a moment to compliment Harry on his new fish.

Winter term began, and Harry got more attention than ever due to the babelfish.

The Ravenclaws were very territorial about the library, and the fish didn’t lend itself to discretion, so it had taken some effort for Harry to secretly learn about what the fish was and what she did.

The babelfish lived off of his thoughts, specifically the energy generated by Harry thinking. Harry didn’t know much about how brains worked, nor how the fish harnessed any power his thinking inadvertently created, but it was still really cool. In exchange for using Harry’s brain like a battery, the fish emitted her own waves which effectively translated things for Harry. It was dead useful, if confusing to have incantations translated when he performed a spell. It

encouraged him to work on casting non-verbally, if only for peace of mind. The fish didn't work when he read something in another language, but if he read it out loud she did.

How such a creature came to exist was beyond Harry. Some wizard had written science fiction novels that mentioned the fish, so babelfish were known in the muggle world too, if as a fictitious creature. It was still vanishingly rare. A few people tried to touch her, but the fish was too quick, and Charity and other prefects soon put a stop to it.

By Easter holiday the fascination with the babelfish had dwindled. New rumors took over, rumors about some event at the end of the year, taking place after final exams.

Harry had bigger fish to fry than rumors about whatever the seventh-years were planning. He had exams to study for, a gobstones tournament to train for, and a babelfish he needed to think nourishing thoughts for. He was a busy kid.

There were three gobstones left in the circle. Both Harry and his opponent, the notorious Nymphadora Tonks, were drenched in a horrific mix of vile concoctions. Tonks wanted to go down in a blaze of glory, but Harry had one more shot to bring the game home. Tonks' pretty black opal gobstone was pressed against two of his rutilated quartz, forming a triangle. Hitting one meant hitting all three.

Harry took a steadying breath.

"Just forfeit," Tonks panted, her eyes slowly turning completely black. The effect was ruined by a glob of pink goo dripping from her nose.

Harry bared his teeth at her and knuckled down.

He flicked his thumb.

The bottle-washer flew in an arc, grazing Tonks' gobstone. The two stones began to spin. The opal moved away from his gobstones like a ballerina pirouetting across a stage. It was the Black Swan *pas de deux*, the bottle-washer smacking against the black opal, launching it into the air. The players and their small audience watched the black opal soar out of the ring, landing with a tiny *thump*.

The bottle-washer blasted Tonks in the face with water. It was a courtesy, particularly in long games, though purists preferred their opponents walk away in total shame.

Charity seized Harry and spun him around, screaming in victory. The Hufflepuff team clapped like the good sports they were, consoling the heartbroken Tonks.

"I wanted to go pro," she cried, messily blowing her nose.

“Nym,” one of her teammates said, “you’ve just been accepted into the auror training program...”

“My dream!” she wailed, collapsing dramatically.

“Oh, get up,” Professor Sprout said jovially. “No need to cry over spilled gobstones. Congratulations, Slytherin team!”

Charity solemnly accepted the trophy, a bronze gobstone captured mid-squirt.

“We’ll need to get it engraved,” Professor Sprout said. “Then it’ll go to the Trophy Room with the others.”

“Thank you, professor,” Harry said, fending off Tonks, who was trying to clutch his robes.

Sprout beamed at him. “I must say, I’ve never seen such an intense match in years! You’ve got quite a team, Captain Lament.”

Charity preened at the title. Power had gone to her head.

Winning a school gobstones tournament wasn’t quite being Head Boy, but Harry was happy to know he’d have a trophy in the same room as his mum. Maybe he’d be able to tell someone, years down the line. Maybe his brother would notice.

It was a nice dream.

Chapter End Notes

Douglas Adams was a wizard. That's canon.

Summer Friends

Chapter Summary

Summer 1991

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It had been a banner year for Slytherin house. Winners of the Gobstones Cup, the Quidditch Cup, and now the House Cup. Green and silver tapestries hung in the Great Hall, and a large silver serpent hissed from behind the head table. It was the sixth year in a row that Slytherin had won the House Cup, and the first time since Charlie Weasley had been made seeker that they won the Quidditch Cup. Charity told anyone who would listen, which wasn't very many people, about how proud they should be that the Gobstones Cup sat in their head of house's office once more, apparently in a place of pride.

It hadn't been a perfect year. The Weasley twins pranked everything in sight, and part of the school had been evacuated during final exams after they dungbombed the entire castle. Argus Filch, the caretaker, had been temporarily hospitalized having passed out in the epicenter while valiantly trying to cordon off the most heavily impacted areas. There was some bullying, like when Terence called a boy from Ravenclaw a *mudblood* for correcting his wandwork in Transfiguration, and when an older student shouted at Phoebe and Jasmine that they should go back to their own countries. That had shocked Harry more than what Terence had done. He knew that blood prejudice was common in the magical world, at least in Britain, and that racism was common in the muggle world, but he didn't think magical people would also be racist about someone's skin color. Both Terence and the boy who shouted at Jasmine and Phoebe got in trouble, but the incidents had left a foul taste.

But the year was over. Those isolated events would hopefully not repeat themselves—Snape had been furious with Terence, as were others in Slytherin if not for the actual word than having the temerity to say it in mixed company. They had survived final exams, and while Harry had to go back to Cokeworth, knowing that Professor Snape was nearby and living proof that it was all real, that his friends all promised to write him over the summer, and that he had a large yellow fish who inexplicably attached herself to him, made the prospect far less onerous.

Harry was looking forward to summer, just a little.

"Congratulations, Mr. Evans," Professor Snape said, handing him the scroll with his exam results. "I shall expect no less from you next year. Choose your subjects wisely."

"Yes, professor," Harry said, opening his scroll. Everyone else at the table was preoccupied with their own, so Harry got a moment to process his straight Os.

Before Hogwarts, his only schooling had been at home. He hadn't gone to the local primary. His gran taught him everything she could, using old books and what school notes remained from his mum and aunt. She brought lots of books from the library too, so Harry had never felt deprived, but an actual school environment was much different than sitting with your gran in the kitchen. The Os were proof that all of his studying and hard work paid off.

"What did you get?" Phoebe asked, crowding him. She sighed loudly. "I should have known. How does anyone manage to get above an A in History of Magic?"

"By not sleeping during class," Adrian quipped, stuffing his own exam results into his robes. "Could you imagine the look on Snape's face if any of us got less than an E in potions?"

Jasmine nervously tugged on her braids.

"I'm sure it isn't that bad," Harry said.

"Easy for you to say," Terence said, "you're his favorite."

"I am not," Harry said, hiding his face behind his results.

"Aw, you're making him blush," Astrid said, pushing his hands down.

"Stop it!"

"We have to study harder so Harry doesn't make us all look bad," Cassius said, grinning at him. "You should start doing worse, for the greater good."

"Please don't," Viridia said from down the table. "If we win the House Cup next year, it'll be a seven-year streak. It's fortuitous."

"You always say shit like that," Marcus Flint grumbled. "This is why I didn't take Arithmancy."

"Oh?" Viridia asked. "It's not because you find the material too challenging? Not because Divination is *an easy O*? I feel like I remember someone saying that just before their OWL a few weeks ago..."

"Piss off," Marcus said without heat.

Viridia smiled at him. "Is this because I'm going to be—"

"So," Eliza Burke said, talking over them, "are you all going to the *thing* later?"

Everyone under fifth year suddenly found themselves shut out of the conversation. Everyone already knew what was happening that night, it wasn't the best kept secret in Hogwarts. Regardless, it was pretty obvious the upper years didn't want any younger kids intruding on their fun.

Harry was rather indifferent to the whole affair, but Astrid had already come up with a plan to sneak them all out, and as the best at potions Harry had inexorably been drawn in.

Getting out of the castle after curfew was no mean feat, but someone had bribed the Weasley twins to create multiple distractions. If any heads of house thought to check the dormitories, it would all fall apart. But, as someone had astutely pointed out, it was the night before the train would take them home, and it wasn't like they could all get in trouble.

As Harry tripped over his feet for the umpteenth time, he had grave doubts about that. Professor Snape would definitely find a way. Revoking Hogsmeade privileges for the entire school, for example. Harry wasn't even sure how he'd get his permission form signed since no one existed to sign it.

Adrian stumbled into him, and Harry stumbled into a bush.

"Sorry, mate," Adrian said, his voice strangely deep. They had all taken an aging potion and had all shot up about a foot. Except Cassius, who towered over them, and Harry, who was shorter than even the girls. He had likely got the dose wrong, but there wasn't much he could do about it at that point.

A bunch of second-years going into the Forbidden Forest at night was a patently stupid idea. Astrid didn't care, marching through the trees with her lit wand held aloft. Harry tugged on his transfigured robes again, glancing into the deepest shadows and uncomfortably aware of how many things in the forest could kill them. For all he knew Hagrid had taken the manticores out for one last hurrah before they were shipped back to Iran.

It took about an hour of walking, but their efforts were rewarded when they stepped through a silencing barrier that made their ears pop. Harry was immediately bombarded by the music, people shouting incoherently along with the lyrics, fireworks going off overhead, showering the crowd with sparks. Smoke swirled all around them, rendering the world ethereal and vague. An older girl Harry didn't recognize crashed into him, nearly clobbering him with a bottle filled with a shimmering pink liquid. She laughed and pushed herself back into the crowd.

"Thank you, Hogwarts!"

Harry was too short to see over the audience, but Astrid had seized his arm and was dragging him up front with her, knocking people out of her path.

“Where did everyone go?” he shouted at her.

“Who cares!”

Harry looked up at the stage, where five graduated seventh-years, all from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, stood with various instruments, dressed in shaggy fur and dragonhide

“That song was off our EP, *Atlantis is Sinking*! We still got some copies at the merch table. This next song is called Blood Sucker!”

The guitarist struck a low, distorted chord, and Harry was blasted with music.

He couldn’t quite tell what they were playing, or what the furry lead singer was grunting into the mic, but it reverberated through him and drowned out every thought he tried to have. Astrid was shouting something at him, and Harry distantly noticed that some of his other friends had shown up again, their faces aged and unfamiliar, lit eerily by the lights exploding above them. It was overwhelming.

The feeling of being crushed suddenly abated as people began levitating.

Words had power, and magic responded to intent. A band of wizards wasn’t *just* a band, it wasn’t *just* music. Magic radiated through the crowd, thick and cloying. Harry shook his friends off and retreated, feeling too hot and too close to ground zero. He ducked under waving arms and people spinning through the air, not stopping until he reached the edge of the clearing and fresh air. He spotted a table that someone must have stolen out of the Great Hall. It was cluttered with bottles, goblets, tiered trays of tea cakes and biscuits.

Harry took a bottle of butterbeer, a little nervous that someone might yell at him for taking something that wasn’t his. But no one cared, and the trays of food were refilling themselves like they did at meals. Concluding he was allowed to have some of the food, Harry uncorked the bottle and took a small sip.

His eyes widened in surprise as warmth blossomed through him. The rich taste of butterscotch coated his tongue, and Harry smiled slightly. He hadn’t had any butterscotch in years.

“Come on, loosen up Perce.”

Someone bumped into Harry from behind.

“Sorry, didn’t see you there! Just trying to get my little brother a drink.”

“It’s fine,” Harry said, moving away from the table. It was Charlie Weasley, and his brother Percy Weasley. Their expressions were similar to when Harry had seen them in Knockturn Alley. Charlie was smiling broadly, uncorking a bottle and trying to get his brother to take it. Percy looked mildly annoyed.

“No thank you, Charles,” Percy said, pushing his glasses up.

Charlie laughed, clapping his brother roughly on the shoulder. "It's my last night at Hogwarts! Be a lad and have some fun."

Someone called Charlie's name and he was drawn away. Harry was left standing awkwardly with Percy.

He cleared his throat. "Looking forward to summer?"

"Not particularly," Percy said, frowning at the drink in his hand. He sighed and took a sip, then grimaced.

"You don't have to drink it, you know," Harry said sagely.

"It's already open. It would be a waste not to."

Harry looked at the bottles and half-eaten food scattered around them and ground into the dirt. "I don't think anyone would care."

"I would care," Percy said tartly, taking another sip.

"Right," Harry said, sipping his own butterbeer. It was very sweet, but he enjoyed the flavor and how light it made him feel, like he was having Fizzy Lifting Drink. He had been jealous of Charlie Bucket when he was little. Charlie Bucket had a family, even if most of them were in bed all the time, and got a golden ticket to a better life. Harry's Hogwarts letter was sort of like a golden ticket.

"The snozzberries taste like snozzberries," Harry said to himself.

"Snozzberry?" Percy asked.

"It's a muggle thing," Harry said, blushing slightly.

"Oh, are you muggleborn?" Percy asked, perking up. "My father works for the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, at the Ministry."

"That's...interesting," Harry said. "How do you misuse a muggle artifact? What even is a muggle artifact?"

Harry listened as Percy talked about muggle artifacts (anything muggle) and misusing them (breaking the Statute of Secrecy). The stories he told, which he had heard from his father, were funny, except when people got hurt, like when a cursed tea set attacked a muggle woman and her guests. The tea set, which had belonged to an old witch, had ended up in an antiques shop. The muggles had got medical care, and had their memories altered with charms.

"They mess with their minds?" Harry asked, horrified.

Percy adjusted his glasses again. He tended to do so when making a point. "There really is no other way to handle such a situation. We can't have them telling each other about their flatware coming to life. This is why it's best for it to not get to that point at all, and why

father is rewriting the laws to make the penalties more harsh. It's very irresponsible, you know, to leave enchanted things about the muggle world."

Harry frowned. "If the muggles knew about magic, it wouldn't be. How would you feel if someone obliviated you every time you learned something they didn't want you to?"

Percy bristled. "That isn't the same situation. They have to be protected from magic. It's for their own good."

Harry laughed, which made Percy even more indignant.

"Do you know any muggles?" Harry asked. "Do you know anything about muggle technology?"

"Well, I...my father is something of a connoisseur. He has an extensive collection of plugs."

Harry had no idea what to say about that, and the flash of yellow above him was distracting. The disillusionment charm on his babelfish was wearing off. His clothes were feeling a bit looser.

Someone grabbed his arm. "Har—Henry! we need to go!"

It was Adrian, and behind him Jasmine was fluttering nervously.

"Sorry," Harry said to Percy, whose face had closed off. It was a drastic difference from how animated he had been while talking about his father's Ministry work. "It was nice talking to you."

Percy nodded stiffly, looking vacantly into the crowd.

Harry and his friends ran back to the castle, tripping over their too-big robes and laughing to themselves.

"That was amazing!" Astrid said. "They're going to go on a tour this summer!"

"Maybe we can get together?" Phoebe suggested.

"That'd be brilliant," Cassius said. "If I can get my parents to agree."

The mood soured slightly at the mention of parents and needing their permission for things.

Harry didn't have that obstacle, but he'd rather have strict parents than none at all. His friends weren't callous enough to say he was lucky. Most of them had lost family to the war. Whether they had been on the *wrong side*, if their parents, aunts, uncles, cousins had been imprisoned in Azkaban or killed by aurors, those losses were no less keenly felt.

Harry hadn't seen Professor Snape since school ended. Snape had sent an owl to Harry letting him know he was busy with things at Hogwarts, and tasking Harry with caring for the plants in the garden. Snape's back garden was not particularly large, barring the magically expanded and well-stocked greenhouse, so it didn't eat up much of Harry's time. For the most part, he was left to his own devices.

The local public library didn't have much in the way of introductory Latin or Ancient Greek, but Harry had reached out to his friends and had received several packages with helpful books. Between trying to wrap his head around Latin grammar and doing his summer assignments, he was fairly busy.

Professor Snape had taken the time to charm the babelfish imperceptible to muggles, otherwise Harry might not have left his house at all.

There was a strange feeling in the air, even in dreary Cokeworth. The smog that polluted their sky had something portentous about it. Some teenagers had taken over the car park at Tesco, and Harry passed them every time he went shopping.

His friends wrote, but so far they hadn't settled on a day to meet up, since everyone except for Harry had gone abroad for the holiday. Traveling was something Harry had never imagined doing. It wasn't in the cards for someone from Cokeworth.

So he was curious about what the other kids in Cokeworth were doing to kill time. Harry had a strong feeling that if he approached anyone about playing a game of marbles—the muggle equivalent of gobstones—he'd be laughed at, at best. It was something he could play on his own, anyway.

What had captured the interest of the local boys, and a few girls, was skateboarding. Harry watched as someone tried to jump over a cement parking block and ended up landing on top of it. He hopped off and rolled around to try again. And again.

"You skate?" someone asked.

Harry shook his head, not knowing how long he had been watching. "I've never tried it."

A skateboard was dropped on the ground in front of him. "Give it a go."

Harry looked incredulously up at the older boy. The boy looked around sixteen or seventeen, with mousy brown hair and pale blue eyes, and blunt features common to Cokeworth, as of yet not hardened by years of tedious work.

"Go on," the boy insisted. "My name's John, by the way."

"Harry," he said, placing a foot tentatively on the skateboard. It immediately started rolling.

"You've got to put your foot over the trucks," John said, waving Harry off to demonstrate. "Keep your balance."

"Right," Harry said, setting his foot in the same place.

“Now kick with your other foot. Don’t worry, it won’t hurt you. Falling is part of the process.”

“I can see that,” Harry said, glancing at a girl who was cradling her wrist. He gave a small push and nearly lost his balance.

“Put your other foot down, you have to distribute the weight.”

Harry spent a good hour learning how to simply propel himself on the skateboard. He felt like a baby just learning how to walk. But it was fun, and the more he pushed himself around, the more his confidence grew.

“Why are you helping me?” he finally asked John.

The other boy grinned sheepishly. “My cousin just opened a skate shop in Manchester. We’re trying to get more people interested. It’s not as popular here as in America.”

Harry nodded, a little distracted as one of the teenagers did something to make his skateboard flip around in the air, falling when the skateboard flew out under his feet. The boy laughed it off, getting up to retrieve his skateboard.

“I think he was trying to do a kickflip,” John said, smiling. “They’ve got magazines where they show different tricks. It’s really hard to get down.”

“Can you do that?” Harry asked.

John shrugged and stepped onto his skateboard. He crouched, then suddenly leapt into the air, kicking his leg out in a move so quick Harry almost missed it.

“Wicked,” Harry said, impressed. It looked much more challenging than puttering around on a broom. For most flying tricks, all you had to do was not fall off. What John had done, the kickflip, required much more skill and coordination, at least in Harry’s eyes.

But, like with a broom, Harry wasn’t sure if this was an activity he could afford.

As such, he was rather disoriented when he found himself sitting in someone’s living room watching bootleg tapes John got from his cousin, listening to someone assure everyone that his mum was working late.

He learned about skaters like Mike McGill, Tommy Guerrero, and Tony Hawk, watched grainy footage of these American skaters going down half-pipes and twisting through the air. It was wild.

“We could make a ramp,” one of the boys closer to Harry’s age said. “Nick plywood from the construction site.”

There was a murmur of agreement as they watched Mike McGill perform what someone called a 540, someone else a McTwist, and someone else a backside 540 with a mute grab. Harry had no idea what any of it meant, but it looked really cool.

It became a habit. Harry worked on Snape's garden in the morning, checked under the brick on the porch for the few quid his professor always left, then went home to read through his texts for third year and beat declensions into obedience. Sometimes he'd see his new acquaintances in town, knocking about or getting shouted at for skating on the sidewalks, or in the street, or in the park, or pretty much anywhere. The Tesco car park was hit or miss, depending on how busy it was. Usually they met up late at night, under the harsh glare of the street lights.

There was music, often provided by a girl named Kenna who came by on her bicycle. The older teenagers smoked and drank, because there was really not much to do in Cokeworth during the summer, other than waste away in front of someone's telly. If their family could afford one.

They were bored.

Harry fit like a round peg in a square hole, though he tried to force himself into the proper shape. Unlike everyone else, he didn't go to the nearby state school. He had to admit he went to a boarding school in Scotland, and his new friends filled in the blanks. The general consensus was that Harry was the by-blow of some *posh wanker* who paid for his schooling to keep Harry's mum quiet. When he admitted his mum was dead, there was a lot of commiseration. *My dad's a bastard too*, things of that nature.

It wasn't all fun and games. The police would chase them around, security guards would shine lights in their faces. Kenna's older brother was a dealer and her mom was an addict. There was something weird going on there that no one wanted to pry into, it was her own business. Billy got busted breaking into someone's house on a dare, Jack broke his leg jumping off a roof. John spent more and more time up in Manchester, getting away from whatever was wrong at home. Laurie got fired from her summer job at the Primark a few towns over for stealing out of the till. Monty Potter was turning eleven and the wizarding world had gone mad with anticipation.

That was hardest for Harry to deal with, other than the many problems his summer friends had. Drugs and poverty were part and parcel of growing up in a half-dead town. Cokeworth had been in steady decay since the coal mining industry began its inevitable collapse in the 1950s, when mines began to close and the jobs started going away and never came back. Harry understood that, he had grown up with it. No one lived in Cokeworth because they wanted to, which made Professor Snape's presence all the more incongruous.

Harry was sick with apprehension. He would get to meet his brother, or at least see him from afar. He had little hope Monty Potter would be sorted into Slytherin. There were too many reasons for him not to be. Harry wasn't sure where he had grown up, or how. But if he knew which house Voldemort was from, and which house his parents were from, Gryffindor would be the safe and obvious choice.

He'd probably only see his brother at mealtimes, from across the Great Hall. There would be no reason for them to interact. That was safer too. A half-brother whose father was on the wrong side of the war wouldn't do Monty any favors, would only tarnish the legacy of Lily Potter.

Maybe when they were older things would be different.

Snape was still busy doing something for the school. By the time Harry's thirteenth birthday came around, a little over a week before his brother's eleventh, Harry had only seen the man a handful of times. He still worked on the garden, carefully tending to the potions ingredients which grew there, and also collected the *Daily Prophet* delivery owls brought every morning. Harry didn't know why they weren't being sent to Hogwarts or wherever Professor Snape was, but he did not dwell on it.

He was reading yet another article about Monty Potter, which said the same thing every single other article did—Boy Who Lived, vanquisher of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, raised in secret, the deaths of Lily and James Potter, ad infinitum—when there was a sudden, blinding pain in his lower stomach.

Harry doubled over, wincing around the agony that radiated through him. He had no idea what had caused it, or what was happening. The pain was tremendous, he could barely think through it. He tried to stand up, to go home and sleep whatever it was off, but his legs were shaky and wouldn't support him. His eyes started tearing up, the pulsating ache relentlessly lancing through him.

Harry didn't know how long he stayed in Snape's back garden, curled into a ball and trying to wish the pain away. It was nearly dark by the time Snape came back. The light flickered on, and the back door creaked open.

"Mr. Evans, why are laying in the dirt?"

Harry shook his head, unable to speak.

"Are you ill?"

Harry tightly nodded, but even the smallest motion exacerbated the horrible sensations wracking his body.

"You foolish child," Snape said, kneeling down next to him. "You should have used the floo. I suppose I must take you to Pomfrey. I imagine St. Mungo's would ask too many questions for your liking."

Harry felt himself being lifted up, but kept his eyes squeezed shut, too scared anything he did would make things worse. But, underneath the pain and fear and confusion, when he heard

the floo flare up and Snape call for Madam Pomfrey, Harry felt immense relief that someone had come to help him.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Thank you for all of your comments :)

With regards to when the truth will come out...well...Snape has no reason to know Lily had been pregnant since she hid it from everyone, Harry has no reason to think Snape was the childhood friend. *Yet*.

And these skater kids are hardcore, so of course they're listening to some local boys, [Napalm Death](#)! (flash/grindcore warning)

What do you think the Weird Sisters sound like? Garage?

Don't Panic

Chapter Summary

It's still the summer of 1991

Chapter Notes

A warning, I guess? There will be some sensitive topics touched upon, and I've updated the tags to reflect that.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry lay on his side on a bed in the hospital wing, his face pressed into a pillow. He grabbed his lower stomach, listening as Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey exchanged hushed words.

“Very well,” Snape said. “I shall be in my office, if my presence is needed.”

Harry listened to the thud of his heels as Snape walked out, then the sound of the doors shutting.

“Mr. Evans,” Madam Pomfrey said. “I need you to lay on your back. Can you do that for me?”

Harry clenched his teeth together and slowly rolled over. “What’s wrong with me?” he bit out, grimacing as his gut throbbed again.

“I’m not entirely sure, dear. That’s what I’m going to find out. Did you eat anything or touch anything strange?”

“No.”

“Alright,” she said, writing something down on her clipboard. “Can you describe the pain to me?”

“I feel like throwing up,” Harry said. “It hurts so much.”

Madam Pomfrey nodded, then carefully reached a hand for his stomach. “Can you tell me where it hurts most?”

It was truly mortifying explaining exactly *where* the pain was coming from, since it was lower than his actual stomach. Madam Pomfrey didn't react, though, taking more notes and pulling out her wand to cast some spells. Harry shuddered as the magic flowed over him.

"Do you know the medical history of any of your family?"

"I'm an orphan," was all he said. He knew his gran had died of lung cancer, but he didn't think lung cancer would cause *that* kind of pain. He didn't know who his dad was, obviously, and therefore nothing about that side of his family. And his mum had been murdered at a young age.

There was a crease in Madam Pomfrey's brow, and she performed another spell. "That's—" she cut herself off before saying anything more. "I need to run a few more tests, dear. I have an idea about what might be causing your pain, but it's a very rare condition and I want to make sure. I can give you a potion that I think will help you for now. How does that sound?"

Harry nodded, and Madam Pomfrey hurried off, quickly returning with a potion the color of the sky after a storm, and a hot water bottle which she directed Harry to hold against his lower abdomen. Harry noticed the babelfish was moving more slowly than usual, and he worried that she would leave him now that his thoughts were in disarray. It made him incredibly sad, and he brushed his tears away before they could fall.

The potion put a stop to the weird throbbing in his stomach area, but not the worst part of the pain, and the hot water bottle helped too. He shut his eyes and curled around it as Madam Pomfrey continued her investigation.

He didn't know how much time passed until she spoke again.

"Mr. Evans," she said gently.

He peeled his eyes open to look at her, feeling a sinking sensation at her expression. "What? What's wrong? Am I dying?"

"No, you're not dying," she said, smiling sadly. "Normally this is something I would contact your family to discuss, but as that is not possible, if you'd like I can summon Professor Snape. The heads of house act *in loco parentis* when a student has no available legal guardian."

"In the place of a parent," Harry said, wishing his growing facility with Latin hadn't been first applied in such a situation. "That's fine."

She took a seat next to him, increasing Harry's feeling of dread. Normally Madam Pomfrey was very brusque and businesslike. A lot of students ended up in the hospital wing for a lot of stupid reasons, and she didn't tolerate foolishness. Maybe it was because it was summer, or because whatever was happening to Harry was so serious. Regardless, this change in her behavior threw him further off balance.

"Perhaps I should explain what I've discovered before you decide to involve someone else. There are some decisions you'll have to make in the future, and it would be helpful to have

someone to discuss them with. But you don't have to, if you don't want to."

Harry raised himself slightly. "What is it? What's wrong with me?"

Harry stared at the ceiling of the hospital wing, feeling very distant from himself. He didn't know what to think, or what to feel. Nothing seemed real anymore.

Magic worked in strange ways, and sometimes it really fucked you over. Or maybe magic had nothing to do with it at all, and things would have always been this way. Madam Pomfrey had been right, what she told him in first year. Magic couldn't fix everything.

You're a little different from other boys, Madam Pomfrey had said. She assured him he *was* a boy, if he wanted to be—and Harry did. He felt like one, he acted like one, he looked like one, he had some of the right parts, he *was* a boy. But he was different. As Madam Pomfrey had carefully explained, something happened when he was developing as a fetus. More accurately, something *didn't* happen, because he hadn't fully developed like other boys. Instead of testes, he had a pair of ovaries, and a uterus, and on possibly the worst birthday in history, those things had started working.

He was experiencing menstrual pain, which was a *girl thing* he had only a vague idea of, and since the external vaginal parts didn't exist, there was nowhere for the blood to go. It was... Embarrassing couldn't encompass what Harry was feeling, or not feeling. The blood had been vanished, a difficult thing since it was trapped inside of his body. Madam Pomfrey talked to him about the different things they could do if he wanted to stay a boy, which he emphatically did. The pain in his chest which he attributed to working too hard in the garden or falling too many times while skateboarding was in fact breast tissue growing, painful due to the useless ovaries inside of him. And Madam Pomfrey had sadly delivered the icing on the cake: he couldn't have children. Not that Harry had ever thought about it, but the option had been taken from him before he had the chance.

So he was staying in the hospital wing overnight, gazing at the dark ceiling through the ring his babelfish made in the air, wondering how many times his world could fall apart before it ceased existing all together.

Including Professor Snape in this new secret of Harry's became less of a choice and more of a necessity as he gradually came to a decision about what to do with this body of his. Snape would be brewing the potions, after all.

There was a term for people like Harry. Intersex. It wasn't something Madam Pomfrey was deeply knowledgeable about; being a school healer meant her expertise was more broad than deep, and intersex people were almost unheard of in the magical world. It was very, very rare. But Madam Pomfrey had her own library of medical texts, and even ventured into the muggle world of medicine to determine a course of treatment.

There were surgeries they could do to remove the girl bits, which Harry would have years to think over before opting for. There were medications too, to increase production of the right hormones, ones that would make him more boy-like.

There were limits to what magic could do. Regrowing bones was as simple as drinking a bottle of Skele-Gro. Creating parts that were never there to begin with was another thing entirely. It wasn't just that he had some working boy parts and some working girl parts. It was in his genes. He had XX chromosomes instead of XY chromosomes. His DNA had woven itself into that pattern. Harry wasn't entirely sure what that meant—they didn't study biology at Hogwarts, or any science at all—but understood it was something intrinsic to his body.

Professor Snape took the news of Harry's condition with cool indifference and mild curiosity.

"I see you strive to be unique in all things, Mr. Evans," he said. Madam Pomfrey had explained what potions they needed brewed. Harry was under the impression his professor would actually be *inventing* them. "One of my ancestors was of a similar disposition."

Harry looked at him in shock. After leaving the hospital wing, Snape had installed him at the kitchen table in Spinner's End and set tea and biscuits in front of him. His gran had also resorted to that whenever he felt bad. Strangely, it helped.

"Oh, yes," Snape said, waving his hand so the tea poured itself. Harry was impressed by this display of wandless and wordless magic. Just to pour tea. "Orestina Principissa, a renowned potions mistress several centuries ago."

Harry analyzed the name. "She was a princess?"

Snape smirked. "Not quite."

Harry sipped his tea, feeling a little better. He wasn't in pain anymore; Madam Pomfrey had plenty of supplies on hand for female students on their periods. That Harry was taking them too was galling, but better than living in agony. He might not have matching organs, but the ones he did have worked, if not quite how he wanted. Knowing he wasn't the only wizard in the world with his condition, even if the other had been a witch from hundreds of years ago, made things seem less lonely, the future less insurmountable. He wasn't going to die. It was just another medical issue to deal with.

"I've heard some interesting rumors around town, Mr. Evans," Snape said, shattering Harry's slightly good mood.

"Sir?"

“It seems the disaffected youth of Cokeworth have finally decided to plunge us all into chaos and anomie,” Snape continued, summoning something from the living room. It was a small paperback book, and it landed on the table in front of Harry. The cover was a streaky pale rainbow video screen, and the title was written in big red letters. *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, by Douglas Adams. The back cover helpfully said *Don’t Panic*.

“I hope this will keep you sufficiently occupied,” Snape said. “It was a favorite of an acquaintance of mine. The radio play was quite popular with muggleborn students when it first aired. Perhaps the library has some copies on cassette.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, surprised both by having been given something and by Snape having acquaintances.

“Do try to stay out of trouble,” Snape said. “This school year has already provided ample irritation, and it has yet to begin.”

Madam Pomfrey not treating him differently, and Professor Snape’s general disinterest, helped. His friends in Cokeworth didn’t treat him any differently either. They didn’t know about him being intersex, it wasn’t something obvious from the outside, but he was still smaller than most boys his age, and he had a compression shirt Madam Pomfrey had made that wasn’t visible under his regular clothes.

Nothing changed about how people treated him, even though his sense of self had drastically shifted.

At midnight on his brother’s eleventh birthday, Harry found himself back in the Tesco car park on a borrowed skateboard, successfully landing a pop shove-it. He was so surprised to have done it he almost crashed into someone.

“Nice!” Billy said, slapping him on the back. He’d been given community service for the attempted break-in, apparently having convinced the magistrate it really was just a dare. There were a few bottles being passed around, and Billy handed one to him. “Go on, that’ll put some hair on your chest.”

Harry smiled awkwardly at the poor choice of words, taking the bottle.

“Don’t waste that on him, Bills,” one of the girls, Laurie, said. She was one of the older teenagers, with short hair bleached nearly white, heavy black eyeliner, an army jacket she’d got from somewhere, and constantly complaining about A-levels.

“Mardy, aren’t you, Loz? Go on,” Billy said again, miming drinking. Harry took a sip, controlling his expression at the taste.

It was vile.

Harry immediately decided he didn't like wine. He handed the bottle back, and Billy took a swig like he'd been breastfed on it, grinning insouciantly at Laurie, who rolled her eyes and walked away to borrow a cigarette from someone.

The difference between being thirteen and seventeen seemed vast, though luckily there were a few kids around Harry's age still attempting various tricks. He spent the rest of the night near them, leaving the older teens to their bacchanal.

When the police finally came by to chase them off, the thoughts Harry had been avoiding crept back in. His skin buzzed with anxiety. His babelfish, named Frankie after a hyperintelligent pan-dimensional mouse, quickened her pace, her ribbon-like tail thrashing side to side.

He felt better once inside his house, under the charm that protected him. He realized he had accidentally taken the borrowed skateboard with him, and propped it next to the door to return later. He walked to the mantle lined with pictures, and his gran's ashes. Harry had often asked her why Monty couldn't live with them. He knew now that, as a sick, poor, *muggle* woman, she hadn't had much of a chance in getting custody of the Boy Who Lived. Harry doubted she had even tried.

It was disheartening to think about what-ifs and maybes. Harry went to his room, picked up the latest book he was reading, and fell asleep in the middle of a sentence, thinking instead about infinity and the end of the universe. It was much less depressing.

The thing about life-changing events was that the world kept moving on.

Harry still had chores to do and books to read, letters to write to his friends, a skateboard to return (though he had yet to find its owner), dentist appointments to go to. Nothing had *really* changed. He was still Harry.

He got his note of allowance a week after his brother's birthday and was promptly shoved through the floo by Professor Snape. The man was in a foul mood, something to do with *the madness which had taken over the castle*.

The Leaky Cauldron was abuzz with people bragging about meeting *the* Monty Potter the week before. Harry felt a wave of disappointment at having missed that, but there was no way he could have predicted when his brother would visit Diagon Alley. For all Harry knew, Monty had visited it loads of times already.

Dejected, Harry made his way to Gringotts for his school allowance. The goblins gave him the money in a pouch, and a few gave Frankie looks of ill-disguised greed. The only odd thing about that was the babelfish being disillusioned. It seemed the spell didn't work on everyone.

After getting his robes and uniform, Harry dithered over getting an owl. He could afford it, but an owl wasn't something he really needed. Deciding against it, he went to Flourish and Blotts for the books he wanted. His mum had taken Divination and Care of Magical Creatures, and Harry had read the assigned books—skimmed through, really—and while both subjects were interesting, neither were particularly useful to him. Harry wanted to invent spells and shit. Also, most Ministry jobs wanted OWLs, if not NEWTs, in Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, and the Ministry was the largest employer in magical Britain. There was a good chance Harry would end up working there.

Flourish and Blotts was empty, if one ignored the family of seven loud red-heads. Harry quickly ducked down an aisle, not wanting to draw the attention of the twins. Fred and George Weasley were even-handed with their pranks, for the most part, but had a special place in their mischievous hearts for Slytherins. And, among their year, Harry was one of the most well-known and recognizable Slytherins.

In his haste to avoid detection, Harry bumped into someone. A book fell to the ground, and Harry crouched to pick it up.

“Sorry,” he said, glancing at the title. “*A Wizard in Muggle America?*”

A pale, freckled hand took the book from Harry, and when he looked up Harry was not very surprised to see the annoyed countenance of Percy Weasley.

“Thank you,” Percy said, his glasses flashing as he pushed them up. “In the future, some small awareness of your surroundings would be appreciated.”

Harry smiled despite himself, causing Percy's lips to thin. “You're absolutely correct. My apologies, Mr. Weasley.”

Percy stiffened, and straightened something on his robes. Harry saw it was a prefect's badge, which for some reason Percy was wearing weeks before school started. “I don't appreciate being made a mockery of.”

“I wasn't being mean,” Harry said. “I just thought...” Harry trailed off. The word *cute* nonsensically stuttered across his mind. “I'm sorry. You take Muggle Studies?”

“I do,” Percy said. “I was just about to rejoin my family to purchase this.”

Percy swayed slightly as he spoke. Harry peered into his face, noticing the other boy was actually *very* pale and slightly clammy.

“Are you alright?” Harry asked.

“I'm perfectly fine,” Percy said, leaning against a shelf. “I just need...something...to eat...”

“Right, well,” Harry said, taking the book from Percy's shaking hand and placing it back on the shelf. “There's a cafe just outside. I can buy you something. As an apology.”

Percy's eyes were unfocused, but Harry assumed he was thinking it over.

“If you insist.”

Harry helped Percy walk out of the bookshop, no easy feat given Percy was nearing six feet and Harry was struggling to reach five. Because of his condition, he wasn't experiencing puberty in the same way others were. He would never be very tall. He hadn't got the aging potion dosage wrong.

Once at the cafe across the street, Percy sank into a chair and leaned over the table, muttering about needing something sweet. Harry hurried inside and purchased a few pastries, not sure what Percy would like, along with some coffee. Harry had only tried instant coffee, and he was curious about what the *real* kind tasted like.

Harry carried his order out on a tray, and set it on the table in front of Percy. Percy had his eyes closed tightly, and his hands balled into fists.

“You have to eat something?” Harry asked.

Percy took a deep breath, then sat up, his eyes focusing on the food. His glasses had slipped down his nose, but Percy was too disoriented to notice. “This is a lot.”

“I had money left over from my allowance,” Harry said. “I'll just take the rest home.”

“Thank you,” Percy said, picking up a slice of almond tart.

Harry was surprised to see how quickly it had an effect. In a few minutes, Percy was sitting up, delicately sipping his coffee, looking a more healthy shade of pale.

“Thank you,” Percy said again. “I don't believe I caught your name. You look familiar...”

“Harry Evans.”

“Ah,” Percy said, eyes lighting with recognition. “Professor Snape's favorite.”

Harry flushed. “Do people really call me that?”

“My younger brothers do,” Percy admitted. “My apologies if it offended you.”

“No,” Harry said, “it's just embarrassing.”

They lapsed into an awkward silence. Harry was curious about what had happened to Percy, but he had only spoken to the older boy once, while using an aging potion, and knew from experience that no one liked their medical issues being pried into.

“So, Muggle Studies?”

Percy nodded, taking another sip of coffee. Harry sipped his own, surprised at the rich taste. It was less bright, less acidic, than the instant stuff.

“Yes,” Percy said. “It's very useful, particularly in Ministry work. My father often interacts with muggles.”

Harry stopped himself from saying anything about muggle artifacts.

“What subjects are you taking?” Percy asked. “You’re starting third year?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I’m taking Arithmancy and Ancient Runes.”

“Only two?” Percy asked. “You could probably get approved for all five.”

They spent some time talking about their school subjects, their pros and cons, their utility in future careers. Percy had apparently read every career book in existence, and had obviously spent a lot of time trying to decide which classes to take, ultimately settling for *all*.

“How do you do it?” Harry asked. “Take so many classes? Is there even enough time for that?”

“Well,” Percy started, looking nervous. Before he could finish, someone called out.

“Percy, dear! I’ve been all over the shop looking for you! I’ve got your books, now come along, we’ve still got to get your robes, and your owl for making prefect! A third prefect in the family, I can hardly believe it! Though of course we expected you to be given the badge, dear!”

It was Percy’s mother, looking as harassed as the last time Harry had seen her. The rest of the Weasley family had followed her out of Flourish and Blotts, and were looking curiously at Harry. He glanced at Percy, and saw his cheeks were tinged pink.

“She never notices...” Percy shook his head. “Thank you again, Mr. Evans.”

“Just Harry.”

“Harry, then. It was a pleasure speaking with you. Perhaps we will meet on the train, or in the course of my prefect’s duties.”

Harry stood up and found himself shaking hands with Percy, who had a firm, if slightly damp, grip.

“Congratulations, by the way,” Harry said, looking at Percy’s badge. “I’m sure you’ve earned it.”

He watched Percy rejoin his family, walking steady and looking fully recovered from whatever episode he’d been having. One of the twins said something to him, and Percy pulled back, turning his head slightly towards Harry before straightening and walking over to his father. The smallest Weasley, and the only daughter, was staring at Harry. He gave her a small smile, and the girl blanched, hiding behind her mother.

After the Weasleys disappeared from sight, Harry went inside to get a box for his leftover pastries.

Chapter End Notes

And another warning for the comments. Some are really kind and insightful, others are...fucked in the head.

First Impressions

Chapter Summary

September 1st, 1991

It was the day Harry had been waiting for. The first of September. The day Monty Potter would start at Hogwarts.

He'd broken his wrist the week before and got a cast at A&E. A few of his muggle friends had signed it. Professor Snape told him, somewhat callously, to live with the consequences of his reckless behaviour—trusting a plywood ramp a little too much—until he arrived at Hogwarts, where Madam Pomfrey could fix it with barely a thought.

It was with less grace than usual that Harry exited the floo at the Leaky Cauldron, dragging his trunk out of the ashes. Snape had been kind enough to let him use the floo at Spinner's End so he wouldn't have to get up at an ungodly hour to take public transportation to Kings Cross.

It would have been kinder for Snape to shrink Harry's trunk, or charm it featherlight, but Harry didn't want to lean too hard on Snape's goodwill. He *had* been running around with the *bad kids* all summer, but if you asked any adult in Cokeworth, they'd say all the kids were bad.

Harry didn't take it to heart. He had enough on his plate. He didn't need or want to feel guilty for having mostly harmless fun with some new friends he made. His friends in Slytherin all got to spend the holiday with their families, travelling, flying, simply *existing* in the magical world. If Harry was going to be abolished to Cokeworth until he was old enough, strong enough, financially stable enough to leave, he was going to make the most of it.

It was with a heavy trunk, a throbbing wrist, and a queasy stomach that Harry made his way from the Leaky Cauldron to Kings Cross. It wasn't that long of a walk, and he hadn't quite conquered his anxiety by the time he reached the station.

He had planned for this. It was no good waiting on the train, or on Platform 9 ³/₄. It was too crowded, too unlikely he'd happen to be in the same compartment, or same part of the train. Harry was fully aware of how obsessed the wizarding world was with his brother. He was a celebrity, a celebrity who had been secreted away just as well, if not better, than Harry himself. *Everyone* would want to see him, to talk to him, to get to know him.

So he had arrived hours early just so he could sit on a bench at Kings Cross and watch pedestrians.

By the time half past ten came around, Harry's stomach was growling and he could no longer feel his backside.

He watched a large man with a large moustache push a cart past, trailed by a small, black-haired boy with baggy clothes and round glasses. Harry barely spared them a glance, until he happened to look in the direction from which they had come. There was a car with a plump blond boy gesticulating wildly in the backseat, and a thin blonde woman with a pinched face. Harry recognized that face. He swung around to the boy, *his brother*, who had just passed.

"Have a good term," the man, his uncle Vernon, said nastily. Harry frowned at the venom in the man's voice. He'd just left Monty standing there with a cart and a huge trunk, staring in confusion at the giant plastic numbers 9 and 10. A snowy owl in a cage hooted, drawing looks from passers-by.

There was something very wrong about this picture. He had never thought his aunt and uncle would be raising Monty, given how thoroughly Petunia had distanced herself from the family. He didn't think Monty would have clothes that didn't fit at all, or tape holding together his glasses, or be confused about how to get onto the platform. Or be utterly alone.

Harry looked around for help, struggling against the urge to walk up to Monty and introduce himself. His brother was so small.

Harry stood up. He didn't have to introduce himself. He could just be another Hogwarts student, helping a first-year out. That was normal.

The decision was taken out of his hands when, of all the people in the world, the Weasley family crashed onto the scene.

Harry watched numbly as Monty spoke with Mrs. Weasley, who was standing with her two youngest children. He watched Percy go through the barrier first, with his new owl. Then the twins. Then Monty.

He hauled his trunk through the crowd, distantly noting he had ten minutes to board the Hogwarts Express. He trailed after the remaining Weasleys, passing through the barrier and into a more magical crowd. He looked around Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, spotting familiar faces from school, and faces he had only seen in the *Daily Prophet*. The Malfoys, the Parkinsons, the Crabbes and Goyles, the decrepit Mr. Nott. All acquitted Death Eaters, all their children destined for Slytherin. It must have been some cosmic joke they were all in Monty's year.

The universe continued laughing at Harry as he checked compartment after compartment, the train chugging to life, feeling a little desperate as he could find neither his friends nor a compartment with an empty seat. Until he got to Monty's.

It was a magical train. Surely it could magically add compartments? But no, Harry had no such luck. He awkwardly sat on the same bench as the youngest Weasley boy, feeling like an intruder.

The Weasley boy, Ron, was showing Monty his old garden rat, red with embarrassment at his family not being able to afford a better pet.

“Percy got an owl for being made prefect, and I got Scabbers,” Ron said miserably. “He’s not as good as an owl, obviously, or that fish-thing.” He looked at Harry. “I mean, it’s just a fish, but at least it *moves*, yeah?”

Monty, clearly wanting to put his new friend at ease, began talking about his own life. Harry listened in dull horror. Not having any money, not knowing about magic, wearing his cousin’s hand-me-downs, never getting presents, sleeping in a bloody *cupboard*.

Harry was thoroughly disillusioned. He had assumed his brother was being brought up by decent people. He didn’t know his aunt at all, but the stories his gran told him never portrayed the woman as someone who would lock a child in a cupboard. Harry had hoped his brother had a better life than he did. But it sounded much, much worse.

He had no idea what to do about it. What *could* he do? Maybe Professor Snape could help, or Professor McGonagall. Surely the headmaster wouldn’t let the Boy Who Lived sleep in a *cupboard*? The *Daily Prophet* would have a field day!

Harry stayed silent as he considered this predicament, taking out a book and letting the two younger boys chat. He looked at Monty over the dog-eared pages, taking in his features. Despite his hard life, Monty was smiling and laughing, his bright green eyes crinkling in the same way Harry had seen their mum’s do in old photographs.

Monty looked a lot like her, which made Harry feel sad and jealous. He had often wished he had more of his mum than his name, since he didn’t look much like her at all. Monty did though, even if he didn’t know it. Harry thought about sending Monty some pictures, anonymously of course. Maybe next summer.

When the trolley witch came by, Harry watched his brother spend nearly a galleon on sweets. Harry understood the temptation, he’d nicked plenty of chocolates in his time. Monty dumped his haul on his bench, inviting Ron to take what he wanted. Ron didn’t hesitate.

Monty smiled warmly at Harry. “You can have some too.”

Ron looked up, a Chocolate Frog stuffed into his mouth. “I almost forgot about you. What’s your name? Are you a first-year?”

His voice was muffled by the kicking frog in his mouth, but Harry understood him well enough. It was annoying to be mistaken for a first-year, but it couldn’t be helped. When Professor Snape finished working on those potions, he’d start growing in the right directions.

“I’m a third-year, actually,” Harry said. “Harry Evans.”

“Really?” Ron said, swallowing the frog. “What house are you in?”

There was no point in trying to hide it. Monty would find out eventually. “Slytherin.”

Both boys looked surprised, but before they could respond there was a knock on the door. A round-faced boy regarded them wanly.

“Excuse me, has anyone seen a toad?”

Harry got up to help the teary-eyed boy find his toad.

By the time Harry returned, having found Trevor the toad hiding in a Chocolate Frog box and doing a pretty good job at disguising himself, a frizzy-haired girl was leaving the compartment in a tiff. She seized the boy and the toad and traipsed off. Inside the compartment the mood had shifted.

“Ravenclaw wouldn’t be too bad,” Ron was saying. “But imagine if they put me in Slytherin.”

Harry shut the compartment door behind him, and the two boys looked up guiltily. He smiled at them, which made Ron flinch. Harry had forgot how people who had little contact with muggles reacted to his braces, especially after months of being around people who considered braces normal on a kid.

Monty didn’t visibly react, corroborating his being raised in the muggle world. “That’s the house Voldemort was in, right?”

“Maybe,” Harry admitted, sitting down. “No one really knows who Voldemort was at Hogwarts, or if he even went to Hogwarts.”

Ron flinched again. “You say his name too?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Harry asked.

“It’s only that Monty says it as well, but he was raised by muggles so he doesn’t know any better.”

“It’s just a name,” Harry said. “In the war people were afraid to use it because they thought he might show up out of nowhere.”

“So he was like a bogeyman?” Monty asked.

“Yes,” Harry said, “but much worse. And bogeymen are also real.”

They sat in thoughtful silence for a few moments, until Ron blurted out, “What’s wrong with your mouth?”

Harry was saved from answering by the compartment door opening again, though this person hadn’t knocked.

“Is it true?” the boy asked. He had rather sharp features for an eleven-year-old, and hair so blond it was nearly white. “They’re saying Monty Potter’s in this compartment?”

“They’re wrong,” Harry said. He looked at the two bulky boys flanking the kid, who Harry was certain was Lucius Malfoy’s son. “Try another compartment.”

“Oh,” the boy said, looking put out. He shut the door again.

“Why’d you say that?” Ron asked.

Harry glanced at Monty, who was plainly relieved. “He was rude.”

Harry was separated from his brother by carriages drawn by skeletal horses and Hagrid swinging his lantern like a hulking parody of a will-o-wisp. He spotted Terence’s head sticking out of the crowd and made a beeline for him. His other friends were there too.

“Harry!” Astrid called, waving frantically. “Where’ve you been?”

“In a compartment with some first-years,” he said, climbing into a carriage with her, Adrian, and Cassius.

“What’s that on your arm?” Adrian asked.

Harry rubbed his cast. Only his fingers were sticking out of his robe sleeve, and that part of the cast was thankfully free of muggle names. “Punishment. Madam Pomfrey will get it off.”

His friends exchanged looks. They never inquired about his home life, and assumed the worst. Harry didn’t bother correcting them.

“Glad she’ll be able to fix it,” Astrid said. Harry noticed her hair had been completely shorn off. “How was the rest of your summer?”

They exchanged pleasantries on their way to the castle, though the conversation inevitably turned to the most interesting recent addition to Hogwarts.

“People kept saying they saw him on the train,” Astrid said. “That Malfoy kid said he saw him in Diagon Alley!”

“I wonder if he’s really like what people say,” Cassius said.

“No one really knows him, do they?” Harry pointed out.

“I bet he’s a self-righteous Gryffindor like his parents,” Adrian said dismissively.

“How would he be anything like them?” Harry asked. “He’s never met them. They’re dead.”

“And good riddance,” Adrian said passionately.

Harry went very still. Astrid noticed, and slapped Adrian on the head.

“Ow! What the hell?”

“Don’t say shit like that,” she said, glaring at him.

Adrian looked at Harry, then at the floor.

Harry closed his eyes, taking slow breaths.

“You think it’s true what they say?” Cassius asked. “That he was raised by muggles?”

Adrian snorted. “Like hell. I bet he’s had a wand as soon as he was out of nappies.”

Harry kept silent, opening his eyes only to stare out of the window.

First the Malfoy kid, now Adrian. Not everyone was happy that Monty Potter was starting at Hogwarts.

Everything Harry heard about his brother was overwhelmingly positive. Hero, saviour. No one was openly supportive of Voldemort, nor the Dark Arts, not a decade after Voldemort got blown up or whatever happened that night. He had imagined Monty would be popular, gossiped about, the same kind of attention muggle celebrities got. People being openly antagonistic towards his brother was an unwelcome complication. Harry didn’t think he could stand aside and let his brother get harassed, if it came down to it.

There were ways of putting a stop to it before it started, to game things in his favor. He could lean on their House Cup streak. Bullying the Boy Who Lived wouldn’t win them points, and he knew the seventh-years were all looking forward to ending on a high note.

Harry was distracted by his nascent plotting as he walked into the Great Hall, greeting his other friends absent-mindedly. They inquired about his cast, and Adrian explained in hushed tones whatever his theory was. Harry didn’t mind this new rumor, it wouldn’t last for long. The cast would be gone before lights out.

Professor McGonagall led the first-years into the hall. You could cut the tension with a knife. Harry looked at the head table. The headmaster was smiling in the vacant way of the very old. Snape looked like he’d rather be anywhere else, but nodded when he saw Harry looking. There was a man sitting next to him who Harry sort of recognized, the Muggle Studies teacher from his first year. Now the man was wearing a turban and fidgeting. There was Kettleburn, whose class some of his friends were looking forward to. No one knew how long the grizzled Care of Magical Creatures professor would remain standing. Literally, the man only had half a leg left.

McGonagall began calling names. Harry clapped politely for the new Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws, and Gryffindors, clapping a little harder as a militant girl named Millicent Bulstrode became the first new Slytherin.

“What have they been feeding the firsties?” Terence muttered as Vincent Crabbe, then Gregory Goyle, joined her.

Draco Malfoy practically skipped to their table, smugly sitting between Vincent and Greg. Lily Moon, Theodore Nott, and Pansy Parkinson were all expected additions.

“We could start a branch of junior Death Eaters,” Harry muttered. Phoebe gasped, and even Adrian looked surprised.

“That’s dark for you, Haz,” Astrid said, sounding impressed.

“He’s not wrong,” Jasmine said softly.

“Did they all have kids at the same time on purpose?” Cassius asked as twin girls were sorted into different houses.

Then came the moment everyone had been waiting for.

“Potter, Fleamont.”

Monty looked terrified, and a little surprised at hearing his full given name.

The Sorting Hat fell over Monty’s face.

They waited.

And waited.

Harry was wondering if something had gone wrong when the hat finally shouted, “Gryffindor!”

The reaction was deafening. Gryffindor erupted into shouts and frenetic applause, some students were openly weeping. Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were caught up in it too. The reaction from Slytherin was far more reserved. Draco and the other new first-years, who kept looking at Draco for direction, had sour expressions. Lily Moon and Tracey Davis seemed oblivious, while Millicent had a perpetual scowl. Harry looked at the new fifth-year prefect, Gemma Farley, and wished her the best with this lot.

The sorting ended with another new Slytherin, Blaise Zabini, making them the largest group of Slytherin first-years since Harry’s.

The headmaster said his nonsense, and the feast began. People kept looking over at the Gryffindor table, at Monty. Harry kept his head down, trying his best to eat with his right hand. A week hadn’t been long enough to get used to his dominant hand being out of commission. He wanted to go to the hospital wing and go to bed. It had been a long day.

The headmaster decided to whimsically make it longer by leading them in a rendition of the school song, something which had never happened in Harry’s memory, nor anyone else’s since no one knew how it went. Dumbledore might have been making up the lyrics as he went. There was some dire warning about a corridor, but Harry was yawning and inured to the headmaster’s dire warnings regarding various parts of the castle and grounds.

After they were dismissed, the rest of his house went to the dungeons while Harry headed for the hospital wing. Once there, Madam Pomfrey tutted at his broken wrist, sniffed disdainfully at the cast, muttered about *careless teenage boys* which made Harry smile, and gave him a firm reminder that he was allowed to visit the hospital wing any time, even during the holidays. Or St. Mungo’s, if he had to. It was another mark against him that he hadn’t.

As Harry flexed his newly healed wrist, Madam Pomfrey hurried off somewhere and returned with vials of a honey-coloured potion, which she explained were for any future allergy issues. If he had a bad reaction to something, the potion would stop him from immediately dying. The vials had tiny retractable needles that would jab him when pressed against bare skin. They were originally used for some other medication, but sleepy as he was, Harry couldn't quite follow what Madam Pomfrey was saying.

"Professor Snape is still developing your other potions," Madam Pomfrey said. "I'll expect you here for weekly check-ups. Are you listening to me, Mr. Evans?"

Harry covered another yawn. "Yes, Madam Pomfrey. Every week."

She tutted over him some more, then sent him off to bed.

The common room was busy with people catching up, some talking about Monty Potter, others trading class notes from previous years. He spotted his friends piled on some couches, Astrid telling an animated story to Terence and Adrian, Phoebe showing Cassius and Jasmine a photo album. They waved him over, but Harry had something he needed to do first. So he showed them his healed wrist, then headed to where the prefects were gathered.

He noted that Eliza Burke had been made Head Girl, while Louis Gage remained a prefect. Viridia Lestrangle was there too, one of the small class of seventh-year Slytherins. She had been made quidditch captain. Charity was still sporting both of her badges, the gobstones captain's badge in a place of prominence. Gemma Farley and Elijah McDowell were the new fifth-year prefects. They'd have the most interactions with the first-years.

"So you got that thing off your arm?" Louis asked, looking him over. "Pucey was saying that it was your arm turning to stone every time you tried to use magic over the holiday."

Harry sighed. "It *was* meant to stop me from using my arm. Madam Pomfrey sorted it."

Viridia gave him a knowing look, which Harry ignored. Not every pureblood in Slytherin was totally ignorant of the muggle world, though Viridia was one of the few who took Muggle Studies past her OWL. It might have been a useless class, but they did learn the odd fact or two.

"Still got your fish?" Charity said, pointing at Frankie.

"Yeah," Harry said, glancing at the babelfish. He was so used to her he'd developed something of a blindspot. "So, Monty Potter..."

There was a collective groan.

"Not you too," Charity said. "Don't tell me you're a fan?"

“No,” Harry said, which was true. Monty was his *brother*, and even if no one ever knew that it still meant something. “I was just thinking, we want to get the House Cup this year, yeah?”

Eliza narrowed her eyes. “We already know the professors will favor him. He’s the golden Gryffindor boy.”

Harry regarded her steadily. “I meant points getting taken *off* for...tarnishing the golden boy.”

Gemma glanced at the door leading to the first-year dormitories. “I can see a few potential issues.”

It was not something they talked about, certainly not in polite company. Eliza and Viridia both had family in Azkaban, as did Louis, and Charity. Harry strongly suspected his dad had been, or perhaps was, a Death Eater. There were only so many ways to interpret *wrong side of the war*.

“A few may need encouragement,” Louis said, frowning slightly.

Harry knew he wasn’t totally aware of all the social and political currents in the magical world. He did know most people worked for the Ministry, and that Lucius Malfoy was often in the *Daily Prophet*, photographed standing next to the new Minister, Cornelius Fudge. A word from him, galleons in the right hands, could end someone's career.

“There are some new members on the Board of Governors,” Eliza said, crossing her legs.

“It’s not just Malfoy,” Gemma said in a low voice. “It’s *all* of them.”

Harry left the prefects to discuss it among themselves. There were rules against casting spells in the corridors, attacking other students, calling other students slurs. But rules were only effective as long as people respected them, and consequences were enforced.

Harry had a largely ambivalent perception of rules and law in general. He navigated the intersection of law and necessity. He obeyed when it was convenient, particularly when it came to taking things he needed or sometimes simply wanted. He didn’t like hurting people, or making them feel bad. His encounters with bullies in Cokeworth made him never want to turn into that kind of person. Nor someone who tortured and killed people for being *different*. People like his mum. People like his brother, whose widely publicised survival of the Killing Curse had made him some kind of magical messiah in the eyes of the public. Harry knew what happened to people like that, he’d seen churches where they put the result on display.

While he didn’t think Monty would get crucified, Harry didn’t want him to be a target at all. It was an impossible task, but Harry *was* a Slytherin.

The ambition to protect his little brother, the cunning to do it from the shadows of the darkest house, the arrogance to think he could, the determination to see it through. Self-preservation to keep his identity hidden, the resourcefulness to pull it off.

As silly as he thought Hogwarts house stereotypes were, Harry couldn’t deny he was Slytherin to the bone. Even if Monty never learned who he was, Harry would do everything

in his power to make sure he was safe and happy.

It was what their mum would have wanted.

Good Ideas

Chapter Summary

The first week of school, September 1991

School was weird, which was saying something given Harry went to a magical school. A dozen weird things happened before breakfast.

Monty Potter's presence was largely at fault. People talked about Monty constantly. They would block corridors and doorways and moving staircases trying to get a look at the Boy Who Lived. Monty didn't notice this at first, too invested in chatting with his Weasley friend and absorbing all the wonder of being a first-year in Hogwarts, and battling with its impossible architecture. But, by the end of the first week, Monty had clearly become uncomfortably aware of the attention he got. The whispers, the stares, the stalking. The prefects had their hands full.

On Friday morning, at the end of the first week, Harry watched a snowy owl make her way to Monty with a note in her beak. It was the first letter Monty had received, and given his own owl was delivering it, Harry suspected it was from someone in the castle, someone the owl herself trusted.

The Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables were between Slytherin and Gryffindor, for everyone's sanity, so Harry had a hard time getting a good look at his brother. Most Slytherins had decided to act indifferent towards Monty, if only in public.

Harry imagined what his dad—potential Death Eater and presumably avid supporter of Voldemort—would think about him being friendly with or unduly curious about the Boy Who Lived. What kind of consequences there would be if Harry acted against his will. It was a delicate balance to be struck. Plenty of Slytherins didn't come from blood purist families, though, and weren't pieces in the larger machinations of the world. Not yet, at least.

Draco had told the story about meeting Monty at Madam Malkin's at top volume several times a day all week, and since he had failed in befriending Monty, decided to be some sort of rival. Harry had hoped the son of people like Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black, from two old and wealthy pureblood families, would have some modicum of subtlety even at eleven-years-old. He could have at least pretended to be tolerant, instead of taking a hard-line anti-Monty Potter position.

Nothing had come of it so far, and for the most part when Draco spoke he was exhausting them all with stories about his father.

The overwhelming stench of garlic was giving Harry a migraine. The smell was getting to everyone in the room, as was Professor Quirrell's stuttering.

There was a rumor going around that Quirrell had a run-in with vampires while in Romania, and that the purple turban he wore was stuffed with garlic. The stuttering was also attributed to the attack. Quirrell could barely get through a sentence, which was fine seeing as there was a massive board he could write notes on.

He never did.

It was only their third class, and perhaps Harry was being too harsh, but he'd already dismissed this as another wasted year in Defence.

That meant a wasted class for Monty too.

Harry had never dwelt much on the quality of education at Hogwarts, having studied independently from such an early age. The most useful thing about being at Hogwarts was actually getting to do magic, all the time, whenever he wanted. But Monty had only just learned about magic. He was at a disadvantage.

Their third year defence class was meant to focus on dark creatures, such as the ones which had so thoroughly traumatised Quirrell. If their professor wasn't bringing in actual creatures to study, it was useless.

Harry had no idea whether the prefects in Gryffindor were making up for their shoddy professors by teaching the lower years themselves. He'd have to talk to his own prefects about that, maybe even bring it up with Snape.

Harry raised his hand, drawing surprised looks from his classmates. While he always answered questions when called upon, Harry *never* volunteered.

"Yes, Mr. Evans?" Quirrell asked with nary a stutter. "Did you have a question about boggarts?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, putting his hand down. "I was wondering if we'd get to practise the boggart-banishing spell on an actual boggart? I'm sure there's one in the castle somewhere, I heard Mr. Filch complaining about it."

Quirrell blinked at him, opening and closing his mouth a few times. "I should t-think n-n-not, Mr. Evans. Surely you d-don't wish your classmates to be...to...to...to be exposed to t-their greatest fears?"

It was a valid point, but Harry didn't back down.

"It's just that, how are we meant to know we've got the spell right if we don't practice it on its intended target? We haven't even got homework on it, since our essay is on the relationship between bogeymen and boggarts."

Quirrell frowned at him, and Harry was struck by the odd, indecipherable look in his eyes. “If you wish to h-h-hunt down boggarts on your own time, Mr. Evans, b-by all means. Now, as I was saying...”

Harry stayed in his seat after class was dismissed, getting strange looks from his friends and classmates. Quirrell had his back turned, erasing the reading assignment he had written on the board, but Harry had the strange impression he was being watched.

“Did you have another question, Mr. Evans? I have my next class to prepare for.”

Quirrell turned around to face him, moving jerkily as he shifted things around his desk.

“I’m sorry, sir, I just think we need more practical work in our class.”

“*Riddikulus* is a fairly simple spell,” Quirrell said, his stutter vanishing once more. “It has been in common usage since before Hogwarts was founded. Not every witch and wizard has the privilege of formal training, yet they find it easy to cast. Do you anticipate having any struggles with it? I was given to believe you are at the top of your year.”

In all honesty, Harry didn’t think he *would* have any issues if he came across a boggart. It *was* an easy spell, and he was more interested in why shouting *ridiculous* at a boggart worked at all. Was it the changed spelling? “I’m not the only student in the class, sir. Other professors have brought in dark creatures, I thought—”

“I’m not like other professors, Mr. Evans,” Quirrell said. “A theoretical grounding is sufficient for a boggart. Now, as I’ve said, I need to prepare for my next class. You don’t want to be caught out in the halls, do you?”

“No, sir,” Harry said, grabbing his bag. “Thank you for your time.”

“My pleasure, Mr. Evans,” Quirrell said drily. “It’s always refreshing to have a third-year student criticize defense pedagogy.” He turned around to write something else on the board.

Harry hurried out of the room, not wanting to be late to his next class. He passed sixth-year Slytherins and Gryffindors, smiling at Charity. She caught his robes just as he passed.

“I’ve got to talk to you about something later,” she said, leaning closer to whisper. “Gobstones business.”

Harry nodded. “I need to talk to you too. Defense business.”

“The best offense is a good defense,” she sagely intoned.

“Isn’t it the other way round?”

“Who knows? There’s the bell. You’ve got potions, yeah?”

Harry cursed under his breath and bolted down the corridor.

Professor Snape was in a foul mood. He barked at Harry to get into his seat, but thankfully didn't take points. He did take a staggering five points each from the Weasley twins for whispering.

"The first-years had their class before us," Terence whispered, pointing at a desk which had been partially melted, and the holes in the floor.

Harry nodded, frantically writing down the instructions Snape had put on the board.

"We will be working on a universal antidote to common poisons today," Snape said. "Unfortunately, there is no such antidote for stupidity. As such, you will find you have all been poisoned. You shall drink your antidote at the end of this lesson to test its efficacy. Should you fail to create an adequate antidote, you will be spending the night in the hospital wing."

Harry knew there was no use in adding to the outraged cries of his peers. It didn't matter whether Snape had actually poisoned them. If he had, it was likely a contact poison, or perhaps something released in the air. Harry immediately began prepping his ingredients.

"Silence," Snape said harshly. "The time spent on puerile protestations would be better spent brewing. Now, *start working*."

Harry glanced over at Terence's work. "You've got to grind the alicorn more. It needs to be like powdered sugar."

"Like what?" Terence said, furiously hammering the unicorn horn.

Harry looked at Jasmine. Potions was her worst subject, and she was shaking like a leaf as Phoebe tried to talk her down. He didn't even want to know what was going on with the Gryffindors. Snape was stalking around them, peering into cauldrons and making deprecating remarks.

It was different from Snape's usual behaviour in class. His criticism always had a reason behind it. He caught people before they made catastrophic mistakes, corrected techniques, gave blunt feedback. Now, to Harry it sounded like Snape was being downright cruel. Had the first-years' class really been that bad?

Harry strained the pulp of his mistletoe berries and stirred the juice into his cauldron. If Snape was having a bad day, Harry wouldn't make it worse by turning in a substandard potion.

No one died, which was the best anyone could say for the class. Snape *hadn't* poisoned them, and Harry couldn't wrap his head around using a fake poisoning to motivate them. They had tested their antidotes on special slips of paper, which in turn was a brief lesson on potions analysis, a topic they would be getting into that year in early preparation for O.W.L.s.

Jasmine hadn't been the only one on the verge of a breakdown. No one, neither Gryffindor nor Slytherin, left Potions in a good mood.

Harry separated from his friends and made his way out of the dungeon to meet Madam Pomfrey for his first check-up.

The first thing he saw in the hospital wing was the toad boy, Neville Longbottom, wrapped in bandages. Another kid sat next to him, frowning in concern.

"Did you forget to take the cauldron off the fire?" Harry asked.

"Neville did, yeah," the boy, Seamus Finnigan, said. "Snape took points off Potter for it."

Neville looked at Harry with watery eyes.

"It's a common mistake. It happened in our class too. Three people ended up here."

Neville's eyes became a little less watery.

"Mr. Evans," Madam Pomfrey, bustling up to him. "Glad to see you here on time. Follow me."

Harry waved goodbye to the boys and sat on the bed Madam Pomfrey pointed at. He tried to follow along with what she was saying, something about hormone levels and a method she was thinking of testing out. He was preoccupied with Monty losing points for someone else making a mistake in class. Without knowing more about what happened, he couldn't say whether it was fair or not.

By the time his appointment was done it was dinner time, so Harry headed for the Great Hall. There, Draco was doing a dramatic reenactment of Neville getting coated in a boiling-hot potion and severely injured. Vince and Greg were laughing uproariously while Pansy giggled. A few of the other first-years, and some second-years, were also laughing.

"Has it been going on for long?" Harry asked, sitting next to Astrid.

"He was talking about it in the common room," she said. "We've got quidditch tryouts this Sunday. Are you coming?"

"Sure," Harry said, watching Draco.

"And then he took two points off from Potter! One for not helping that idiot Longbottom, the other for cheek! He couldn't answer basic questions. Honestly, it's like he grew up under a rock."

Harry turned to the food that had just appeared, happy to see shepherd's pie. His gran had made it a lot, when she was still able to cook. It reminded him of her.

"Evans. Evans!"

Harry looked down the table, surprised to find Draco addressing him.

"What is it?"

"What's that in your mouth?" he asked imperiously. "What's it for?"

Next to him, Astrid shook with silent laughter.

Harry smiled at him, enjoying how repulsed Draco looked by his exposed braces. "It's to teach me to keep my mouth shut. We don't suffer fools in my house."

"They don't like obnoxious brats," Astrid said, startling Harry by throwing her arm over his shoulders. "They find it...distasteful."

"Unpalatable," Harry said.

"Unsavoury."

"Vapid."

"Nauseating."

"Insipid."

"Noisome," Phoebe chipped in. "Am I doing it right? Did I win?"

Draco had grown redder with each word, apparently not as stupid as he acted. He stuck his nose up and turned back to talk with his friends, at a lower and less grating volume.

"Thank you," one fourth-year girl said. "He's been driving me up the bloody wall."

"I thought it was funny," Marcus said, sharing a grin with the boys sitting next to him.

"You think flatulence is funny," Charity said, emphasising her point by stabbing a potato.

"It *is* funny."

Harry happened to agree—he *was* a thirteen-year-old boy—but thought it best not to express that opinion. He returned to eating his shepherd's pie, letting the conversation wash over him. He surreptitiously looked at the Gryffindor table, glad to see the loss of two points hadn't affected his brother too badly.

Harry stood before what could only be described as a shrine.

“We’re on a roll,” Charity said, marching back and forth in front of the display she had erected in the dungeon room commandeered by their gobstones team. “Nothing can stop us. We’re like Sisyphus, the weight of the world on our shoulders.”

“That’s Atlas,” Louis pointed out, not looking up from his book. “And Sisyphus was being punished.”

“What are you even doing here?” Charity demanded. “You aren’t on the team!”

Their bickering faded to the background, along with the clatter of gobstones from the rest of the team practicing. Harry looked at the small display Charity had arranged on a plinth. It was a circle of obsidian gobstones and tapered green candles. In the centre was a gobstone trophy, or an excellent transfiguration of one, and a framed photo that looked clipped out of the *Daily Prophet*.

“I made it *very* clear that gobstones would remain a priority!”

“Then *you* tell Eliza!”

The caption read *Eileen Prince, Captain of the Hogwarts Gobstones Team*.

The girl reminded Harry of someone, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. She was on the tall side, for a girl of about fifteen. She was thin as a rail, as if accustomed to deprivation. The photo said it was from the 1945 championship, and Harry knew both the muggle and magical worlds had been at war during that time. She had a thin face too, pallid even in the black-and-white photograph. She had heavy brows, a straight and prominent nose, and dark eyes that glowered out of the picture. Her mouth had a sullen twist to it, and her face was framed by bluntly cut black hair.

“Brilliant, isn’t she?” Charity said. Harry looked up, and noticed Louis had left. “Captain of the school team *and* the house team. Can’t believe they nixed the interschool tournament. We used to play the international circuit!”

“It’s terrible,” Harry said absently, still examining the photo. “I’ve never heard of a Prince family.”

“I’ve never heard of an Evans family,” Charity said, nudging him. “Doesn’t mean they don’t exist. The Princes were relevant up until the eighteenth century, then they started dying out. It happens with purebloods, when the blood gets a little *too* pure. They don’t lower themselves to associate with muggleborns like the rest of us.”

“Right,” Harry said.

“She looks a bit like you, doesn’t she?” Charity said offhandedly. “You get that look sometimes.”

“Do I?” Harry asked, trying not to act like his world had been upended. Eileen Prince *did* look a little like him. He’d seen those same eyes in the mirror, his hair was the same stick-

straight black when he let it grow out. There were differences, so maybe his dad had been a cousin of hers, or a brother, or even a son.

Harry had yet to attempt to identify his dad. His mum's letter hadn't suggested it, but she also hadn't discouraged it. Perhaps she had planned to tell him at some point. If she had lived.

This gave him a path to explore. It might not lead to anything, but it wouldn't hurt to look.

He turned to Charity. "Where did you find her photo?"

Harry stepped into the Hogwarts library's archive of the *Daily Prophet*. It had every single issue, multiple copies of each, dating back to the paper's founding in 1734.

Harry loved the school's library. He'd love it more if it was less stingy with its information. And if things were easier to find. There were tens of thousands, *hundreds* of thousands, of issues to go through. The *Daily Prophet*, the *Evening Prophet*, special issues, the several decades they tried to make the *Luncheon Prophet* work. Thankfully, it was in chronological order, and he had a place to start. 1945.

Harry had just got through the first week of January when the door to the archive opened again. It wasn't a popular part of the library, so he was surprised someone else was visiting it on the weekend. He was more surprised that it was Percy Weasley.

"Oh, you're here, Evans," Percy said.

"Just Harry."

"Of course. Harry. Are you researching something?"

"I am," Harry said, smiling slightly. Why else would he be there?

Percy walked towards him, stopping at the cabinet with issues from 1944.

"What are you here for?" Harry asked.

"We have a comparative essay on the muggle war going on during the Global Wizarding War," Percy said, pulling out a drawer.

"The Second World War," Harry said.

"You've heard of it?" Percy asked, looking over at him. His hair glowed under the lamplight, and Harry was stuck with the urge to tug on one of Percy's curls. He knew from Jasmine that it was a rather common reaction to curly hair, and that plenty of people took the liberty to invade someone's personal space and give into it. It was perfectly normal.

“Of course I’ve heard of it,” Harry said. “Millions of people died. Entire cities were destroyed. Every muggle in the world knows about it.”

Percy’s ears turned red. “I’m sorry, you’re muggleborn, right? Obviously you would know your own history.”

“I grew up in the muggle world,” Harry said, shrugging. “This is for Muggle Studies, then? There’s...a lot of misinformation in that class.”

“Is there?” Percy asked. “How do you know? You aren’t taking it, are you? Seems a bit redundant.”

Harry snorted softly. “No, but I have looked at the book. They haven’t even spelt *electricity* properly.”

“So it isn’t *eclecticity*?”

Harry solemnly shook his head, not wanting to laugh at Percy’s distress.

“I’ve got to get an O in the O.W.L.,” Percy said. “Millions of people died, you say?”

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “Maybe you should try reading a muggle history book on it.”

“An excellent idea. Do you have one?”

“Well, no, not with me. But they’ve got muggle libraries, you know. In every muggle town.”

“In *every* town? Really? How remarkable.”

Harry went back to the January issues, a plan slowly forming. The Hogwarts library was fundamentally a magical library, all the books had to do with magic in one form or another. The books *themselves* were magic. He doubted Percy would find anything useful in the *Prophet*. Even if they reported accurately on muggle events, the lack of competition meant a great deal of license for the writers.

“What are you researching?” Percy asked.

“Genealogy,” Harry said.

“Ah, you’re in Slytherin, that’s right,” Percy said knowingly. Harry glanced at him. “Many pureblood families are well-versed in our family histories. They often overlap. It’s a small world. I’m sure as a muggleborn you get left out of certain conversations.”

“Exactly,” Harry said, relieved Percy had come up with his own extremely plausible explanation.

“You’ll want to look for marriage and birth announcements,” Percy continued.

“That’s a great idea,” Harry said, doing just that. He’d been skimming all the articles.

By the time dinner came around, he was still going through the 1945 issues. There were hundreds of them. He realised, belatedly, that the Princes might not have been a British pureblood family. They could have moved. Many witches and wizards had fled Europe during Grindelwald's time. Still, it was worth going through the *Prophet*. He'd seen a marriage announcement for Charlus Potter and Dorea Black. He wasn't sure how they were related to Monty, but he imagined his brother would be happy to have any information about his other relatives. There wasn't much to say about the Evans side. They'd been mining coal before they even had a family name.

He and Percy left the library together, both drawn out by the dinner bell.

"I shall have to visit one of those muggle libraries," Percy said. "They don't take owl orders, do they? Perhaps mother would patronize the one in Ottery St. Catchpole."

Harry had spent the past few hours thinking over his plan. As a third-year, he would *prima facie* be denied a pass into the Restricted Section. Harry would bet anything that Percy already had one.

"I could help you with Muggle Studies, if you'd like," Harry said. "I've got some history books at home, and I can answer any questions you have about muggles. I've even got some muggle friends."

Harry knew there were muggleborns in Gryffindor. Even Monty was effectively a muggleborn, given he was raised in ignorance by their aunt. There were certainly people in his house Percy could talk to, but Harry was counting on one thing stopping him from doing so.

Pride.

"Would you?" Percy asked, pausing next to a bookshelf of siren poetry. It was all in Greek. "That would be deeply appreciated."

"I could use help with some schoolwork too," Harry said shyly. "Maybe we could trade?"

Percy got a shrewd look in his eyes. They were a rather pretty hazel. Harry brushed that thought away and focused on trying to look innocent.

"What did you have in mind?" Percy asked carefully.

Harry smiled.

Sneaky Slytherins

Chapter Summary

September 1991

Viridia stood on the quidditch pitch, her broom planted on the ground. Most of the team had graduated, and now half of Harry's friends were trying out. He couldn't tell from Viridia's expression whether she was impressed by their performances or not. A good portion of Slytherin house had shown up to watch the tryouts, and he watched from the stands with them.

Phoebe and Jasmine were talking to each other, going over what sounded like their Charms assignment. Harry had the *Sunday Prophet* on his lap but he wasn't reading it, preferring to watch his friends fly and pass the quaffle around.

Astrid was an amazing keeper, her smaller frame giving her more maneuverability than the usual bulk the Slytherin team fielded. Terence retained his position as seeker, outflying a second-year. Cassius and Adrian tried out for chaser, but Marcus had been on the team for years alongside Viridia, and Elijah, the fifth-year prefect, better matched their flying. But Cassius and Adrian both got on the reserve team, so that was nice.

It was a good line-up. It was anyone's guess who the Gryffindor seeker would be now that Charlie Weasley was gone. Harry didn't pay much attention to quidditch, only enough to keep up with his friends' conversations, but he gathered that Gryffindor hadn't even trained a reserve seeker. They were unprepared.

"Anything interesting in there, Harry?" Phoebe asked.

He shook his head. "Just the obituaries."

"Aren't you morbid," she said, wrinkling her nose. "Who died?"

Harry looked down at the paper. "Arcturus Black."

"I suppose that's the end of the Black family," Phoebe said wistfully. "They've all married out or gone mad in Azkaban."

Jasmine grimaced at the mention of the prison. "They could be released," she said quietly.

"Not bloody likely," someone said. It was a fourth-year boy, Graham Montague. He was a thick-set teenager who had a tendency to scowl, like he was doing now. Not at Harry and his friends, but at the pitch.

“My brother’s been there for six months,” Graham said. “They won’t let mum and dad visit him. He’s only got a few months left, but when people come back from Azkaban, they come back different. It’s the dementors, you know.”

Jasmine’s face closed off, and she turned to face the pitch again. No one talked about it, but everyone knew her father had been in Azkaban since Voldemort’s fall. Augustus Rookwood’s trial had got more media attention than most, since he had been an Unspeakable in the Department of Mysteries passing information to Voldemort. Information, and who knew what else.

Azkaban was terrifying. Harry didn’t know much about muggle prisons, but he doubted they had soul-sucking monsters as their guards.

“Um, what’s your brother in there for?” Phoebe asked.

Graham shrugged. “He got caught in a raid in Knockturn Alley. Some asshole was selling creature parts in a pub, and Warren was sitting next to him at the bar.”

Phoebe gaped at him. “That’s not fair!”

Graham scoffed. “Who said anything about fair? You think the Ministry cares about that?”

Harry glanced at Jasmine again, then said, “Hey, weren’t you on the reserve team last year? Why aren’t you trying out?”

Graham sat back, his ire draining away. “My marks were too low. Snape and Flitwick are the only ones who care about that. McGonagall doesn’t.”

“So you’d rather be in Gryffindor?” Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Fuck no,” Graham said emphatically.

“Language, Mr. Montague!” Gemma called out.

“Fuck off, you tart!”

Harry looked over at Jasmine again, sharing a small smile with her. Then Astrid came running at them, pulling off her helmet and waving it around. “I’m on the team!”

“Finally,” Jasmine said. “Maybe now she’ll shut up about it.”

Astrid did not shut up about it.

Getting on the team had galvanized Astrid, and she split her time at meals between talking to them and arguing with Viridia and Marcus about strategy. The team often sat together, and

though Cassius and Adrian were reserve players they were included as well. Harry, Phoebe, and Jasmine had little to contribute to these conversations, which was a mixed blessing as none of them were particularly interested in quidditch.

One Thursday morning, a few days after the tryouts, Harry was eating porridge and keeping an eye on his brother. The school had not calmed down about Monty Potter, but enough people had got detention to drastically decrease the tramlings.

What had caught Harry's attention this morning, other than the novelty of seeing his brother, was Draco sauntering to the Gryffindor table, flanked by Vince and Greg. Harry knew the first-years had their flying lesson that day. Draco had been loudly complaining about not having a broom and telling all sorts of outrageous stories about his flying ability, including evading a *hellycopper*.

Neville Longbottom was holding up a glass ball with red smoke, and Draco snatched it out of his hand.

"Oh, come on," Harry muttered.

"What is it?" Phoebe asked, looking over. "Is Malfoy making a fool of himself again? Please tell me we weren't like that as first-years."

"You were worse," Jasmine said, stealing a piece of bacon from her.

Phoebe gasped in indignation. "I was not!"

Monty and Ron both got to their feet, raring for a fight. Harry knew Ron had older brothers, and had probably got into a few dust-ups with them. Had Monty got into a lot of fights in the past?

Harry looked down the table for the nearest prefect. "Gemma?"

"I see it," she said, narrowing her eyes. "McGonagall's already got it handled."

"Let him have his fun," Marcus said, not looking up from his food. "They're only firsties."

"I'm not losing the House Cup because he wants to steal toys from the other babies," Viridia said darkly. "It's not been two weeks."

"We can't stop him from talking to his classmates," Louis said, yawning. "Unless you want to start casting silencing charms every time Malfoy tries to say something stupid. Then any other first-year who does. Then second-years. Where does it stop?"

Marcus gave an exaggerated sigh. "All anyone's been talking about is Potter this, Potter that. The little shite needs to be taken down a peg or two."

There were murmurs and significant glances at this. No one wanted to contradict Marcus, nor support what he said, though the team's beaters Lucian Bole and Peregrine Derrick were visibly amused. It was safer *not* to have an opinion on Monty, for now.

Harry stirred his porridge, thinking.

Harry ultimately hadn't given much thought to the minor incident at breakfast. He had classes to attend, homework to do, gobstones to practice, friends to hang out with. It wasn't until after dinner, when Draco was bragging to anyone who would listen, that it came up again.

During their flying lesson, Neville had fallen off his broom. The cursed Remembrall, a singularly useless trinket, had rolled out of his robes to be picked up by Draco. He refused to give it back, luring Monty into the air, whereupon McGonagall saw him diving for and catching the Remembrall. She dragged Monty off, presumably to be punished.

Harry had seen Draco approach Monty again at dinner, but hadn't been able to hear what words had been exchanged at the time. Based on his blathering in the common room, it seemed Draco had challenged Monty to a duel at midnight, one Draco had no intention of attending.

Now, this was a pretty obvious set up. If it had been anyone else, Harry would have shaken his head and returned to the conversation he was having, putting it out of his mind completely. But this was his brother.

It was a fairly harmless prank, the only real consequence being loss of points and detention. If Monty was naive enough to actually show up—he was eleven-years-old, the son of two war heroes, and in Gryffindor, so yes—it would be a good learning opportunity. Don't play into a bully's hand.

When Harry went up to his dormitory with the others, he stayed up reading, occasionally checking his watch. He was still on the fence about interfering, until he remembered the trophy room was on the third floor, and there was a corridor on the third floor very near to it in which, in the headmaster's own words, someone would find a very painful death.

Harry closed his book.

Sneaking out of the Slytherin common room was easy. Astronomy was held at midnight for all years, and on Fridays it was the sixth-years who had continued it past their O.W.L.s. Harry only had to follow them. Of course, he had disillusioned himself, and Frankie. He had heard Snape casting the spell on her for summer. It was a tricky spell that did something with the light around the person or object to make it blend with its surroundings. The more he tried to wrap his head around how it worked, the worse Harry's attempts got. Still, his efforts were

sufficient to go unnoticed by groggy sixth-years as he slipped through the common room and crept after them.

As the sixth-years continued for the Astronomy Tower, Harry slunk through the third floor. Just as he reached the entrance to the trophy room, he saw something very annoying. It seemed that Draco had done a little more than lure Monty out of his common room.

He had told Filch.

Filch and Mrs. Norris were walking towards him from the other end of the corridor, a lantern swinging from Filch's hand.

Harry considered his options. Filch was a squib, and somewhat defenseless when it came to magic. No one ever crossed that line, though, or if they did they weren't caught. He checked for any portraits, and noticed they were all sleeping, or at least had their eyes closed. There were no ghosts in sight.

The Confundus charm was as complicated as one wanted it to be. It could cause anything from simple confusion to fabricating false beliefs. It didn't work the same on people and animals. Mrs. Norris was a regular cat, if eerily intelligent, and had a less complex brain than a person. Filch relied on her senses.

Harry pointed his wand at her first and whispered, "*Confundo*."

Before Filch could react to the flash of pink light, Harry pointed his wand at him and repeated the spell.

Filch shook his head and swung around, Mrs. Norris trotting at his side as they made their way to their new destination, the quidditch pitch. Harry breathed out shakily, glad the spell had worked. He checked the corridor again to make sure it was empty, removed the disillusionment charm from himself, and stepped into the trophy room.

He was dismayed to see not two, not three, but *four* Gryffindor first-years lurking about the room.

"He's late," Ron whispered, "maybe he's chickened out."

"He was never coming in the first place," Harry said, making all four of the kids jump.

Monty had his wand out, but lowered it when he saw Harry. "I remember you. You're that third-year from the train."

"A third-year *Slytherin*," Ron said, frowning at him. "What do you mean Malfoy was never going to come?"

Harry slowly walked towards them, not wanting to scare the kids. Neville was on the verge of fainting, and Hermione kept looking between him and the door.

"I mean he set you up, and was bragging about it in the common room," Harry said, smiling apologetically. "He even told Mr. Filch where you'd be."

“I told you!” Hermione exclaimed. “I said it was a trick!”

“Keep your voice down,” Harry said gently. “You lot need to get back to your common room. Come on, I know a shortcut.”

Harry walked to the door at the other end of the trophy room, and after a moment he heard the patter of feet behind him. He couldn’t believe they were running around the castle in their pajamas.

Monty hurried forward to walk at his side. “Why are you helping us? I mean, why do you care if we lose points?”

“Do you recall the headmaster’s warning at the beginning of term?” Harry asked, looking down at his little brother. He had no idea what he wanted to do. Hug him? Help him with his homework? Invite him to live at the house in Cokeworth?

“About the third floor corridor?” Monty asked. Harry noticed someone had fixed his glasses. The tape was gone.

“The third floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death,” Hermione recited.

“Yes, that one,” Harry said, looking at Monty again. “Which floor is the trophy room on?”

“The third floor,” Monty said, his eyes lighting with understanding. They really were just like their mum’s, it was startling. “You think Malfoy was trying to *kill* us?”

“No,” Harry said, “I think he was just trying to get you in trouble and probably forgot about it. Alright, just behind this tapestry is a staircase that will lead you up to the seventh floor. You can get to your common room from there.”

“How do you know where our common room is?” Hermione demanded. “How do you know about a secret staircase?”

“It’s in a tower,” Harry said. “All the towers are accessed from the upper floors. And I knew about this because I’ve spent time exploring the castle.”

Harry surveyed the kids. Monty, who looked curious. Ron, who looked annoyed. Neville, still shaking. Hermione, puffed up indignantly.

“If you’re going to sneak about at night,” Harry said, “you need to be more careful. You don’t know enough magic to protect yourselves from anything dangerous. Ron and Neville can tell you two about the kinds of creatures that live in and around magical homes. What would you do if you ran into a boggart?”

He got four blank looks, until Neville, for some reason, raised his hand.

“Yes, Mr. Longbottom?” Harry asked, suppressing a smile.

“Get my gran?” he said uncertainly.

“Because you don’t know the spell to deal with it, right?”

Neville nodded.

“I’ve read about those,” Hermione said.

“That’s great,” Harry said, checking his watch. There was plenty of time before the Astronomy class let out. “There’s also the portraits and ghosts, who report to the professors. Mr. Filch, Mrs. Norris, prefects, the professors on patrol. In addition to all the potential magical dangers in a castle this old.”

He started up the hidden staircase, not checking to see if he was being followed. This particular staircase was unusually short given it traversed four floors, in some manner. In a few minutes they were walking down the seventh floor corridor.

“So,” Monty said, “you’re saying if we’re going to sneak around, do a better job of it?”

Harry grinned at him. “Exactly.”

“Should you really be encouraging them?” Hermione asked, crossing her arms.

“You’re here too,” Harry pointed out.

“I got locked out of the common room!”

“So did I,” Neville said sadly.

“What about you?” Ron asked, narrowing his eyes. Harry noticed he was nearly as tall as his twin brothers, which meant he was taller than Harry. No wonder Ron had mistaken him for a first-year. “Do they teach you all about sneaking around in Slytherin?”

“Yeah, we’ve got a secret club specifically for it,” Harry said, looking down the hall to where the Fat Lady sat in her portrait. “Looks like your common room guardian’s back. See you around.”

Harry tapped his head with his wand, amused by the gasps of surprise as he melted out of sight. As he turned away, he heard a whispered *thank you*.

Nothing much changed after Harry had rescued his little brother from the threat of detention. He did notice Monty looking around for him during meals, but Harry kept his head down and resolved to take less overt action in the future. There was really no plausible reason for him to have gone out of his way for kids in a different house and year. He could have just Confunded Filch and left.

A week later there was another event at breakfast. A suspiciously broom-shaped package carried by a parliament of owls made its way to Gryffindor table. The owls deposited it in front of Monty.

Astrid's teacup cracked in her hand. "James Potter was the Gryffindor team captain. He was a genius flier. I've heard stories about his games all of my life." For some reason, she glared at McGonagall when she said this.

"Looks like Gryffindor has a new seeker," Harry agreed, pleased she had come to the same conclusion as him. Seen flying after a small object by McGonagall, receiving a broom when first-years were specifically forbidden. There was really no other explanation. Harry watched Monty and Ron hurry out of the Great Hall carrying the package.

Further down the Slytherin table, Draco stood up. As he passed them, Astrid seized his robes.

"This is your fault," she hissed. "If we lose our first match, this is *your* fault."

Unnerved, Draco shook her off and backed away. "My father—"

"I don't give a shit about your father," Astrid growled, turning back to her food.

The rest of the quidditch team, having come to the same conclusion about the broom Monty had just received, looked at Draco with varying degrees of annoyance. Draco's face went red, and he hurried away, chased by Vincent and Greg.

"Twat," Astrid said, shaking her head.

"Where's he running off to?" Astrid said, watching Monty and Ron leave the Great Hall. It was dinner, and Harry's head was aching from another tedious Defense lesson.

"Wood's missing too," Terence pointed out. Harry looked at where the fifth-year Gryffindors sat. He saw Percy there, frowning about something. Harry had only seen him in passing since their first encounter in the *Daily Prophet* archive. He'd probably need to send a school owl to arrange an appointment.

"We should follow them," Astrid whispered.

"Where?" Phoebe whispered back.

"Where else? The quidditch pitch!"

"Count me out," Cassius said. "I'm not properly on the team, and I've got to finish my natal chart for Divination."

“Me too,” Adrian said. “And we’ve got that essay on murtlaps.” He looked at Jasmine, who nodded, then smiled apologetically at Astrid.

“Is Harry the only one who does his homework early?” Astrid asked, looking around. “Fine, he can come with me.”

“I can?” Harry asked. “I was going to do some research in the library.” He did not look at the Gryffindor table.

Astrid waved her hand dismissively. “This is more important.”

Harry only put up a token protest. He *did* want to see his brother fly. Astrid didn’t want to wait for dinner to be over, so they abandoned their food and hurried out of the castle. It was already dark out, and the stars were brilliant above them.

Before coming to Hogwarts, Harry had never really seen stars. The skies of Cokeworth were choked with smoke from the factories. The night was clear, and he was struck anew by how beautiful the sky was. After two years of Astronomy, he could recognize many of the stars and planets, the shapes they formed. Astrid physically dragged him away from his musings and they snuck across the grounds.

There was no one else at the pitch when they arrived, but Harry heard someone hurrying through the grass and pulled Astrid under the stands. It was Monty, running eagerly for the pitch. Monty looked around the stadium in awe, as if he had never seen it before. If their flying lesson had ended prematurely, perhaps he hadn’t. Then Monty mounted his broom and shot off. Astrid sucked in a breath.

“That’s a Nimbus 2000,” she whispered. “How the bloody hell did he get one of those? I’ve been on the waitlist for months!”

“McGonagall must have got it for him,” Harry whispered.

He could hear Astrid grinding her teeth. “He must have been flying for years. Look at that handling! That’s not even its top speed.”

Harry listened to Astrid’s muttered commentary as he watched his brother fly around the pitch. He did look very comfortable flying. Harry knew this had to be only his second time on the broom, but Monty had both natural talent and no fear of heights.

“Maybe he was a snidget in a previous life,” Astrid was saying. “He’s come back to be a seeker and punish all quidditch players for driving his kind into extinction!”

“Astrid, Wood’s coming.”

“Never say those words in that order again.”

“Alright.”

They listened as Oliver Wood explained how the game worked to Monty, which offended Astrid so deeply Harry feared she might never recover. While Harry was happy for and proud

of his brother, he understood why Astrid was so upset. Monty hadn't known anything about quidditch. He'd never played it, didn't know the rules, had never seen a game, and yet was being given one of the most important positions, and his head of house was flouting school rules that kept Astrid and others off their own teams for years. It wasn't fair.

"McGonagall must be desperate," Harry said as they walked back to the castle. "If their only choice for seeker is a first-year."

"He's a prodigy, Harry," Astrid said glumly. She had seen enough. "I need to talk to the captain about this. Terence can't outfly Potter, not on a bloody *Comet*."

Bell, Book, and Candle

Chapter Summary

September/October 1991

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry kept his expression neutral when a letter fell onto his plate. He looked up at the screech owl as it flew away. It was hard recognizing individual owls, but he knew Percy had a screech owl as he had seen him with it at Kings Cross. Harry tucked the letter into his robes and left the table. It was a normal Monday morning.

“He’s never got mail before,” he heard Phoebe whisper. “Something must have happened.”

“Did you see his face?” Adrian said.

Harry ignored them as he exited the Great Hall. It was always best to let people form their own conclusions. The stories they told themselves were the easiest for them to believe.

Secrets have a way of making themselves known, Mr. Evans.

Harry shook his head and stepped into an empty classroom to read the letter.

Dear Mr. Evans, it began. Harry smiled at this form of address.

Thank you for your letter. I was not aware Gobstones required such vigorous training. I don’t believe my own house’s team meets with such frequency. Oliver Wood, the captain of the Gryffindor quidditch team, has informed me their team only trains three times a week. Perhaps students not in their OWL or NEWT years have more time for extraneous activities.

Harry raised his eyebrows. He knew Percy wasn’t on the quidditch team, and he doubted he had even wanted to be. All of his brothers loved the sport, and with the exception of Ron were on the team. Harry imagined Ron would be on the Gryffindor team in the future, and maybe their sister as well. However, he hadn’t expected Percy to apparently *dislike* quidditch.

Given the times you are available, I believe we can come to an arrangement. I agree to your proposed location, and shall be in the Daily Prophet archive on Wednesdays and Fridays from last class to dinner.

Regards,

Percival Septimus Weasley, fifth-year Gryffindor Prefect

Harry put his hand over his mouth, trying to smooth out the idiotic grin on his face. He needed to get his books from his dormitory and go to class. He was really looking forward to Wednesday.

Harry walked down the stairs to the *Daily Prophet* archive. The main floor of the library was on the first floor of the castle. Most people didn't know the library had more levels, that it delved underground, fitting into the warren of dungeon corridors. The air was cooler and drier the further down he went, and runes glowed dully on the walls, controlling the environment and lighting his path. There were other passages and doorways that led to more archived materials, some accessible, some locked away, and certainly some only Madam Pince and the castle knew of. Hogwarts had been created as a refuge for magical children, and its library was a repository of magical knowledge that spanned millenia. Harry had barely scratched the surface of what it offered.

He opened the door to the *Daily Prophet* archive and spotted Percy immediately. He was sitting at one of the few tables in the room, scribbling furiously on a piece of parchment. Harry quietly watched him for a moment before clearing his throat.

"Oh, Evans, I didn't see you there."

Harry didn't bother correcting him. People in Hogwarts were kind of weird about calling each other by their surnames. Having never gone to another school, Harry didn't know if it was normal. No one he knew in Cokeworth had the habit.

"So," Harry said, taking a seat across from Percy. "Where do you want to start?"

"Perhaps we can start with your personal life?" Percy suggested. Harry raised an eyebrow, and was rewarded with a faint blush. "What I mean to say is, what was it like growing up muggle? What is that device in your mouth for? What were you wearing on your arm at the welcoming feast?"

Harry leaned forward. "This is just between us, right? No one knows about where I grew up, and I'd like to keep it that way."

Percy frowned. "I'm not in the habit of sharing confidences. I *am* capable of discretion."

“Alright,” Harry said, mollified. “The thing in my mouth,” he said, showing off his teeth, “is called *braces*. Muggle healers are called *doctors*, and doctors have different specialities. The ones who fix teeth are called *dentists*. People who specialize in correcting crooked teeth and stuff are called *orthodontists*. So I’ve got these on to straighten my teeth out. It’s only for a few years, they’ll come off soon. The thing on my arm was a cast. Doctors put them on to make sure bones heal straight. I broke my wrist over summer skateboarding.”

“I see,” Percy said, writing notes on a new piece of parchment. “And what is... skateboarding?”

They spent a few hours going back and forth. Harry had plenty of his own questions about growing up in a magical house. There weren’t many books on it. In fact, the magical world had put little effort into integrating muggleborns and their families. Harry had got some experience at Professor Snape’s house, but Harry suspected the man had also been muggleborn, or maybe a halfblood who grew up with muggles. Maybe that was why he took interest in another Slytherin from a similar background.

After a few hours the dinner bell clanged faintly in the distance and they wrapped up. Harry left Percy to organize his notes and climbed back up to the first floor. On his way out of the library, he noticed Hermione Granger sitting alone at a table, nearly hidden by stacks of books. Harry had unfortunately heard Draco complaining about her almost as much as Monty.

From Draco’s ranting, he knew she was a muggleborn—though Draco used a far more offensive term—and something of a know-it-all. It must have been galling to be outperformed by a girl who had just learned magic was real. It was one reason Harry was keen to hide his own status, though he liked to think his friends wouldn’t mind.

Harry also knew she was another student Snape had taken an instant dislike to. It was more confusing than his reaction to Monty, because Snape preferred hardworking and intelligent students. If anything, Hermione should have been a favorite. Was it her personality? It would explain why she was studying alone.

Deciding it wasn’t the kind of problem to be solved before dinner, Harry passed the girl without comment and left the library.

The next few weeks slipped into a routine. As the professors really sank their teeth into the school year, the course loads increased. Harry was still ahead in all of his core classes, but Arithmancy and Ancient Runes provided new and interesting challenges. Arithmancy was mathematics, true, but it was fundamentally about the *meaning* of numbers. In muggle mathematics, the number two represented the set of all objects of quantity two. All it was, all it remained, was a quantity. Fundamentally, a measurement.

Arithmancy took a more liberal view of what a number meant. Two could be two eyes, two birds, twins, the letter B, any one of the twenty-nine *kanji* with two strokes, second place. The number carried the *meaning* of what it represented, and that meaning was what was important. Similar to the Elder Futhark they were learning in Ancient Runes. Each rune referred to a concept, a sound, and more. Harry was curious *why* they used Elder Futhark. Perhaps it was tradition, commonality, inherited meaning. Would such a rune have the same meaning in Burma, where Phoebe's grandmother was from? Or in Argentina? Madagascar?

The question of *how* magic worked and *why* it worked haunted Harry. He felt very alone in not accepting it at face value. He knew intent mattered, almost to the exclusion of everything else. It was why wordless and wandless magic were possible. It was an almost god-like power to *will* what one wanted into existence.

But, if that were a case, creating a spell would be as simple as simply *wishing* it to be a spell. There was something more to it.

This was what Harry was thinking about during his weekly appointment with Madam Pomfrey. She didn't really need his participation or input on anything that was happening, and Harry preferred not to think about it. He couldn't change what was happening to his chest and how wrong it felt, he wasn't old enough. He couldn't get the things inside of him removed for similar reasons. He didn't have to see it, at least. He had school to worry about, and Monty.

"Professor Snape is still working on a potion for you," Madam Pomfrey said.

Harry glanced at her, and saw she was holding a flat wooden box.

"I was speaking to one of my colleagues about your case—"

"You told other people about me?" Harry asked. He felt a little dizzy. His heart was pounding.

Madam Pomfrey gave him a withering look. "I did not mention you by name, Mr. Evans. There are hundreds of children at this school. This particular colleague is married to a muggleborn, and is more knowledgeable about muggle healing. She also happens to have pertinent experience regarding similar cases. Now, as I was saying, while Professor Snape continues working on a potion to treat your unique circumstances, we can attempt a muggle course of treatment. Typically muggle medications do not work for magical peoples, and vice versa, but since you come from a muggle family the hope is that this will be somewhat effective."

Harry was paying attention now, as Madam Pomfrey explained that she would be giving him daily subdermal injections of testosterone. He could do it himself, but she wanted to monitor any effect it had.

"There is one other thing we need to discuss," Madam Pomfrey said, and Harry's heart sank. "Your adrenal glands—those are on top of your kidneys—aren't functioning properly. They aren't producing enough of certain hormones."

Harry closed his eyes and took a steadying breath. “Okay, what does that mean?”

Madam Pomfrey patted his knee. “Nothing serious. We can make up for it with other injections. My colleague believes this is something we *can* repair for you. Perhaps over Easter break?”

Harry looked up at her. “What’s her name?”

“Andromeda Tonks.”

Madam Pomfrey gave him his first injection, pinching skin on his hip and jabbing the needle in. It stung, and there was a lingering burning sensation. She explained some of the things he could expect to experience. Changes to his skin, his sleep, his mood, swelling near the injection site. Even though he was excited for something to finally be happening, months after he had been diagnosed, he paid careful attention to what she said. He didn’t want to be surprised or confused by any of the side effects.

Harry pulled his robes on, straightening them in an effort to calm himself down. He left the hospital wing feeling a little nervous. Would anyone notice? How long would it be until *he* noticed a difference? Distracted by his thoughts, he nearly bumped into Percy, who was on the way in.

“Sorry,” Harry said, stepping back from the door.

“Evans,” Percy said, not quite meeting his eyes. “Are you well?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Are you?”

Percy was looking pale again, and a little sweaty. His eyes were unfocused.

“Never better,” he said. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Percy brushed past him, hurrying into the hospital wing. The doors swung shut behind him. Harry shook his head and continued down the corridor, wondering if the illness Percy had in Diagon Alley had come back.

The gobstones separated with a *crack* that resounded through the common room. Harry closed his eyes, grimly awaiting the noxious liquid which Charity’s bottle-washer would douse him with.

It never came.

Harry opened his eyes and saw she hadn’t got a point. He looked up at her, confused. Charity wasn’t looking at the gobstones ring. Instead, she was looking at where the second-years sat. Killian was next to Flora and Hestia Carrow, the twins, playing a game of Exploding Snap.

“Dissension in the ranks,” Charity muttered. “Killian is our man on the inside, but he’s gone native.”

Harry watched the pile of cards explode, leaving a smoking wreck in its wake to the amusement of the players.

“Not everyone is called to the stones,” he said solemnly. “He still comes to all of the meetings.”

Charity grunted in agreement. “Maybe we should make it seven days a week. Reify his commitment.”

“You don’t want to lay it on too thick,” Harry said, lining up his shot. “It’s too desperate.”

Charity sighed and turned back to their game. “You’re right. Is there any potential in the first-years?”

Harry thought it over. “Bulstrode, maybe. Crabbe, Goyle. I’ve seen them playing a few times, with Davis.”

“But do they have a competitive spirit?” Charity muttered. “Or are their hearts divided?”

She gave Harry a significant look, which he met with a blank stare. Perhaps bringing his skateboard to Hogwarts hadn’t been the best idea.

To be fair, he hadn’t expected anyone to be patrolling the dungeons after curfew. Other than for Potions, no one from the other houses visited the dungeons. The Hufflepuff common room wasn’t technically in the dungeons, but more of a basement area. It was much brighter and warmer, based on the corridor that led there and its proximity to the kitchens.

It was lucky that Charity had been the one on patrol. As the team’s ace player, she had little motivation to punish him for a victimless crime, though she did have questions about what he was doing, and even took a spin on the skateboard herself and demanded he demonstrate some of the tricks he knew. It took ages to get one down, which was part of the reason why he hadn’t wanted to give it up while at school. It also helped take his mind off things.

Harry flicked his own bottle-washer, watching the liquid-filled gobstone ping from stone to stone, its rotation sending it spinning back just as it reached the perimeter of the ring and continuing its path of destruction.

“Merlin’s balls, Evans,” Charity said, her eyes darting around and not liking what they found. She looked up with a manic grin. “We’ve got this in the bag!”

Professor Quirrell droned on while Harry longed to enter a fugue state. Their past two defense professors hadn’t been anything to write home about—not that Harry *did* have

anyone to write home to—but they hadn't been afraid of their own subject.

That Friday's topic was pixies. Pixies were perhaps the most innocuous species of dark creature. It reminded Harry of a song he had heard on the radio over the summer, and he wrote the lyrics in the margins of his notes.

Your head will collapse, and there's nothing in it

And you'll ask yourself

Where is my mind?

"...Evans."

Adrian jabbed him in the side and Harry sat up. "Yes, professor?"

Quirrell's nervous disposition tended to vanish along with his stutter on a whim. It was deeply suspicious. "The charm to repel pixies? Specifically Cornish pixies?"

"Yes, sir. According to Lockhart, the incantation is *peskipiksi pesternomi*. However, people who have attempted this spell have only reported successfully whacking the pixie over the head with their wand. Pixies and other fairies can be captured by baiting a cantrip with milk and honey."

"*Which* cantrip, Mr. Evans? For Cornish pixies."

"It's derived from Cornish," Harry said, being a little obsessed with etymology. "*Kipsie habag*."

"V-very good, Mr. Evans," Quirrell said, turning back to the board. He had begun to write on it more often of late. "Five points to Slytherin."

Adrian shot him a grin, and Harry half-heartedly smiled back. Quirrell had asked him a question on something they hadn't covered in class or in their reading, not for that week at least. He had been asking Harry more and more questions like that, as if to catch him wrongfooted. Harry had only brought the books he needed for third year with him, and he didn't know any of the fourth-year Slytherins well enough to borrow any of theirs, so some of the time he spent in the library had been devoted to dark creatures research. He had to stay ahead.

When the bell rang, Quirrell said, "Mr. Evans, if you could stay for a moment."

His friends gave him commiserating looks, but filed out with the Gryffindors in their class. Fred and George Weasley stuck their tongues out at him, and for some reason they were colored purple. Harry remained in his seat once the class had emptied.

“You wanted to speak with me, professor?”

Quirrell was erasing the board. It was another habit of his, to speak to Harry with his back turned. Harry imagined being attacked by vampires made you fear confrontation in general, though he couldn't imagine the same result for himself.

“I noticed you've been a little distracted in class,” Quirrell said, really taking his time to thoroughly erase the board. “Are you perhaps bored?”

Harry *was* bored. He did all the reading, wrote his essays as soon as they were assigned, but couldn't practice anything they covered. He hadn't hunted down anything as Quirrell had suggested. Their first encounters with dark creatures should be under supervision. That was the point of magic school, of having people around to help if a spell went wrong or didn't work at all.

“I think,” Harry said carefully, “that a more practical approach would be more engaging.”

“And you expect me to travel to Cornwall to acquire pixies for a two hour lecture?” Quirrell asked.

“Professor Kettleburn could help,” Harry said. “Or Mr. Hagrid.”

“So I should impose upon two equally busy men to procure materials for my class?”

Harry had already been feeling irritable that day. He never had much of a temper, his anger had always been more cold and clarifying. However, since Madam Pomfrey had been giving him daily injections Harry was sometimes tense and quicker to anger. She promised that it would level out eventually, that his body would take time to adjust to the changes, and that whatever potion Professor Snape came up with wouldn't have that issue. At that moment, he was incredibly frustrated with Quirrell's goading and wanted to snap at him, yell, demand answers.

“Is there a reason why?” he asked calmly. “There are plenty of dark creatures on the grounds. Grindylows in the Black Lake, hinkypunks in the Forbidden Forest, things like that.”

“You seem very adamant about this, Mr. Evans,” Quirrell said, finally turning around. He gave Harry a small smile, but his eyes were oddly predatory.

Harry gave him a quizzical look. “I'd rather practice *before* running into a dangerous situation.”

“Very well, Mr. Evans,” Quirrell said, still smiling. “If you are so determined to encounter a dark creature, I shall endeavor to acquire one.”

Harry passed by Hermione Granger on his way to meet Percy, unsettled from his interaction with Quirrell. It sounded like Quirrell was threatening him, and Harry didn't think there was much he could do about it. Professor Snape would probably think he was being a nuisance and overreacting.

In the archive, Percy was waiting for him with a single book. It was thin with black cover and nothing to identify its contents.

"You're not choosing the kinds of books I expected," Percy said by way of greeting.

Harry sat down next to him instead of across. They had agreed to alternate days. Harry would help with Muggle Studies, Percy would get a book from the Restricted Section and hover over Harry's shoulder while he took notes.

"Did you think they'd be *dark*?" Harry asked, smirking as he pulled the book over. "I'd just go to Knockturn Alley and have a look. Madam Pince keeps track of all the books we read, it would be stupid to pick something too questionable. And besides, there's nothing *really* dangerous in the Restricted Section. Those books are much better hidden, if they exist."

Percy pulled the book back before Harry got a chance to open it. "This *is* dark, Evans. Any mind magic is considered so."

"Like the Ministry Obliviators," Harry said knowingly.

Percy's lips thinned. "Yes, the Ministry gives special dispensation to certain departments in certain circumstances."

"Because aurors really need to use Cruciatus."

"I never said I *agreed* with such a vague policy," Percy said. "I do want to know what you're using this for before I let you read it."

Harry kept quiet, but Percy was a patient person, despite how bossy he was as a prefect.

"I only want to learn more about occlumency," he finally said. "I have no interest in invading someone's mind. Most of them are probably boring."

"Good," Percy said, sliding the book back. "I've already marked off those pages."

Percy went back to his own studying, while making sure Harry didn't read the wrong part of the book or however he thought of it. He *did* want to read more about legilimency too. Understanding it better would mean being able to defend against it better. Without anyone to practice with, it was impossible to know how good his supposed natural occlumency was.

He looked over at Percy, wondering if he would be interested in learning that kind of magic together.

"What is it?" Percy asked without looking away from his work.

“That Granger girl,” Harry said, reaching for a safe topic. “She’s been late to dinner often. I only know since I always see her studying when I leave.”

“Hermione Granger, right,” Percy said, a troubled look crossing his face. “She isn’t very popular with her classmates, or the other girls in her dorm. I think Patil and Brown were friends before Hogwarts. My brother hasn’t been kind to her either. She *was* a hatstall, and I imagine she argued her way out of Ravenclaw.”

Harry wanted to ask if Percy had been the same, since it sounded like he spoke from experience. “Can’t you do something about it? As a prefect?”

“I can’t *make* other students be friends with her,” Percy said, sneering a little. It was a rare expression for him to make, and Harry was fascinated by it. “And unless she complains to someone about the treatment she’s been getting, or I observe it happening, my hands are tied. I can’t mete out punishments based on personal feelings.”

“Of course not,” Harry said. He was glad he had been sorted into Slytherin with generally nice people. There were issues, of course. Blood status, bigotry against werewolves. Personality differences, or people simply being annoying. But it wasn’t as bad as the current batch of first-years. Harry might have put the hat back on and demanded Ravenclaw.

“I’ll speak with Professor McGonagall about it,” Percy said. “If Granger’s missing meals, that’s a problem. I’m sure our head of house has dealt with similar cases in the past.”

Harry hummed in agreement, then went back to his reading.

When the dinner bell rang, he passed the book back to Percy and said, “See you next week.”

“You’re not going to Hogsmeade?” Percy asked, surprised.

Harry grimaced. His friends—Astrid and Adrian, mainly—had been outraged on his behalf. For weeks. “I haven’t got anyone to sign my form,” he explained.

“I’m sorry,” Percy said, plainly embarrassed. “I thought...I assumed there would be an exception in your case. Have you talked to Professor Snape?”

“No,” Harry admitted. “He’s been rather off lately, don’t you think?”

“He has always been harder on Gryffindors,” Percy said, “but yes, his, ah, approach to the material is a bit more demanding this year.”

Harry covered his mouth to hide his smile. “Precisely. I haven’t wanted to impose upon him.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to ask,” Percy said

“I’m not so sure about that,” Harry said to himself.

“What’s that?”

“I said I’ll think about it.”

Percy nodded firmly, as if it was all settled, then followed Harry out of the archive.

Harry glanced back before he left the library, and saw Percy talking to Hermione among her stacks of books, which looked more and more like walls every time Harry saw her. It appeared they were having a hushed and impassioned argument, so Harry left them to it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your comments! I love reading them, even if I don't always know what to reply :)

I've started a new job that has a ton of down time (for now), so I've got lots of notes for future chapters.

Prefects and Trolls

Chapter Summary

Hogsmeade and Halloween, 1991

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry saw his friends off at the Entrance Hall, where Filch and Professor McGonagall were checking names off their lists. By midmorning the castle had emptied. It was just first-years, second-years, and Harry.

He thought about searching for Monty, but dismissed it as a bad idea. He considered visiting the library, going through more *Daily Prophets*, but thinking about it made his head hurt. So he wandered the castle aimlessly, looking at portraits and tapestries, checking behind them, scrutinizing the statue of Gunhilda of Gorsemoor, a one-eyed witch with a pronounced hunch who looked like she was hiding something. He spotted Peeves cackling and floating down a corridor with a bag full of something Harry didn't want to be the victim of. He evaded the poltergeist by going into the trophy room.

The trophy room was more of a trophy hall. It was huge, much larger than it appeared from the outside. The ceilings were vaulted and mirrored, reflecting the sparkling contents of the room. There were chandeliers and other light fixtures that illuminated the various awards. He found the Quidditch Cup with James Potter's name on it and wondered if Monty had seen it yet.

There was a curio cabinet with panels of smoked glass set into its doors. The trophy room was open to all students, so Harry didn't expect any danger. Nevertheless, he took a step back and pointed his wand at it.

"Partefacio."

The doors sprang open, and Harry immediately realized his mistake.

Monty stepped out.

He was dressed in the same baggy clothes Harry had first seen him in. His glasses were cracked, his scar was livid and bleeding. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes dull and empty.

"Why didn't you save me?"

Harry pointed his wand again. *"Riddikulus."*

“Why didn’t you ever come for me?” Monty asked, limping forward. Harry backed away.

“*Riddikulus!*”

This was bad. There was no way to explain *this* being his boggart.

“Are you going to leave me again?” Monty, the *boggart*, relentlessly asked. “Are you going to make me go back to the cupboard?”

“*Riddikulus!*” Harry didn’t know Monty well, he’d barely spoken to him. But he didn’t think his little brother was a cruel person. “*Riddikulus!*”

“Are you even my brother? Are you even a real boy?”

The knife-edged accusations stabbed Harry in his most vulnerable places. He had to make it funny. He had to laugh. “*Riddikulus!*”

Boggart-Monty farted.

It startled a choked laugh out of Harry, and boggart-Monty looked mortified. He forced another laugh, driving the horrible thing back into its cabinet. He didn’t bother vocalizing the spell, just slashed his wand down and the doors slammed shut. Something fell behind him with a clatter and he jumped. Harry had retreated all the way into another shelf of trophies, which had fallen to the floor.

The door to the trophy room burst open, and Professor Snape stormed in.

“Mr. Evans,” Snape said, looking disdainfully at the fallen trophies. “What are you doing in the castle? Shouldn’t you be in Hogsmeade with your...friends?”

“I don’t have permission, sir,” Harry said, flinching when another award fell. “I was just looking around. There’s a boggart in that cabinet.”

“I am well aware,” Snape said, sneering at the offending cabinet. “Mr. Filch has been asking Quirrell to remove it for weeks.” He looked back at Harry. “As for your permission to visit Hogsmeade, it has been dealt with. Heads of house may waive the form when a student has no living family.”

Harry’s eyes widened in surprise. “I didn’t know that.”

Snape stared at him, and Harry flushed in abashment. “As I have said in the past, you must *ask* about these things, Mr. Evans. I cannot read your mind.”

Harry opened his mouth to point out that Snape *could*, but Snape saw the look in his eyes and kept talking.

“Clean this up, then get out of my sight.”

It was lucky Snape had found Harry when he did, as there was plenty of time left in the day. It wasn't even lunch yet. Filch didn't bat an eye when Harry gave him his name, and Harry left the castle in relatively high spirits. The autumn air was bracing. The Whomping Willow's leaves had begun to turn, and its flailing branches made it appear to be on fire. There wasn't smoke coming from Hagrid's hut, but Harry spotted Fang sleeping on the front porch, and could see the huge orange lumps of pumpkins waiting to be harvested.

The boggart's words kept repeating themselves in his mind. *Are you even a real boy?*

Hogsmeade was a quaint little village of cottages with thatched roofs and a high street packed with magical shops and pubs. Fragrant smoke drifted from chimneys, mingling with the cloudy sky. Harry had only worn trousers and one of his grandad's sweaters, but the spiced scent in the air warmed him.

On High Street, Harry allowed himself a moment to marvel at the sight. He passed Zonko's first, where he saw the Weasley twins arguing over what to add to an already full basket. Harry didn't quite get the wizarding world's enthusiasm for pranks. It was widespread enough to support an entire joke product industry.

Not a fan of practical jokes, Harry moved on.

There was Scrivenshaft's, filled with an aviary of quills. Harry liked the process of cutting his own quills, and wanted to charm them on his own. Then there was Ceridwen's Cauldrons, and Dervish and Banges, which looked like a pawnbroker, buying, selling, and repairing various magical trinkets.

Harry smelled Honeydukes before he saw it. It exuded sugar, as if they were pumping the odor into the air to lure children.

It was the first place which caught his interest, and where he might find one of his friends. It was packed like an ambitious box of truffles, but Harry stuffed himself in. He wasn't fond of crowds, but being part of one gave him some degree of anonymity, and presented ample opportunities for theft.

Harry wasn't going to steal from any of his fellow students, nor Hogsmeade businesses. He had money left over from his allowance. That, and he wasn't overly familiar with magical security. There were all sorts of alarm spells, and charms to keep purses and pockets safe. Harry used a few of them himself. He lived under the strongest one, the Fidelius Charm. And the school library didn't exactly offer books on how to circumvent such magics, not publically.

So he looked around, gradually coming to the sad realization that even if he wanted to buy something, he couldn't eat the majority of what Honeydukes sold. Fizzing Whizbees, Ice Mice, Exploding Bon-bons, Shock-o-Choc, Pepper Imps. All would destroy his braces in uniquely whimsical ways.

As Harry worked out a risk analysis on Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans, someone bumped into him. He didn't think much of it, there was a lot of bumping into going on, until a familiar voice apologized.

"Beg pardon...Evans?"

Harry smiled up at Percy. "Hey, Weasley."

"You got permission from Professor Snape?" Percy asked, his hand straying to his prefect's badge. Harry wondered if he had ever taken it off.

"He found me exploring the castle and said it had been waived," Harry said. "I was curious about what they sold here, but there isn't much I can eat."

"I find myself in the same predicament," Percy said. "An acquaintance of mine wanted to make a purchase so we stepped in, but I'm...not fond of sweets."

"Really?" Harry asked. "That time in Diagon Alley you said—"

"That was a special circumstance," Percy cut in.

Harry puzzled over this for a moment, then his eyes lit with comprehension. "I've heard of that, but it's a muggle disease. Do you have diabe—"

Percy slapped a hand over Harry's mouth. "We can discuss this *later*."

Harry reached up to pull Percy's hand away. Percy had nice hands with elegant fingers his gran would have called *pianist fingers*. Harry's stomach was doing something weird, and it was getting hard to breathe. He'd have to see Madam Pomfrey about his chest binder. "Sorry, I was surprised."

"Quite alright, Evans," Percy said, straightening up. "Ah, there's my acquaintance. Wednesday?"

"Right," Harry said, watching Percy push his way through to the counter. He stopped next to a tall blonde girl Harry recognized as one of the Ravenclaw prefects. They were standing rather close together. It was probably due to how crowded it was.

Yes, that had to be it.

Harry left Honeydukes in a slightly worse mood than he had entered. It was because of all the sweets he couldn't have. No matter, he'd have his braces off soon and then he could eat whatever the hell he wanted.

The thought didn't cheer him as much as he hoped it would.

Studiously not thinking about Percy going around Hogsmeade with a pretty girl, Harry proceeded down High Street. It was nearing lunch, and up ahead he saw the sign for the Three Broomsticks, the primary local purveyor of butterbeer.

The door opened and Harry was bombarded by the smell of apples, butterscotch, and roasting meat. He slipped in before the door shut again, scanning the bar and tables for familiar faces. He'd never eaten alone at a pub before. He could barely get a foot in at any in Cokeworth, unless he was quick. He didn't mind being alone, he had spent so much time isolated, but it would stand out here.

He saw Astrid the same time she saw him. She leapt out of her chair and waved him over. She was sitting with Terence and Cassius, and they stole a chair from another table for him.

"I thought you said you couldn't come," Astrid said accusingly.

"We've just ordered," Cassius said dispassionately. He had an aloof air about him, the detachment of an easy life and old wealth, but he put in as much effort as Harry did, even if he tried to hide it.

Astrid wrinkled her nose. "The others wanted to buy parchment or whatever. Well, Jasmine wanted to go to Gladrags. We said we'd meet at Spintwatches after lunch. I've dropped my broom off for a retwiggling."

"Same here," Terence said. "I need every advantage I can get over that Nimbus."

"How'd you manage to get out of the castle?" Cassius asked. "Did you sneak out?"

"And what on earth are you wearing?" Astrid asked, plucking his sleeve.

Harry rolled his eyes to the ceiling. It was quite clean, for a pub. Magicked. "It was my grandad's," he said. "And Professor Snape waived my permission form. Turns out he can do that."

Terence smirked at him. "Told you you were his favorite."

"That's slander, Mr. Higgs," Harry said. "I should go up and order. What are you lot getting?"

Ordering a plate of roast and potatoes, and a warm mug of butterbeer, only cost a few sickles. It seemed wasteful to Harry to buy food in Hogsmeade when it was free at the castle, but it was his first time in the small village and it would have stood out to *not* buy something to eat with his friends.

Harry was starting to feel better. The food was delicious, the meat was so tender he could cut it with a spoon. The butterbeer warmed him through and left his limbs tingling, relieving the lingering horror of the boggart. It had been a roller-coaster of a day, but he could still talk and laugh with his friends.

All three of them were anxious and excited for the upcoming quidditch match against Gryffindor. Astrid had continued her spying on Monty and the rest of his team. It sounded like the Slytherin team had a fight ahead of them. A lot rode on the first match, both in terms of the house rivalry and in setting the tone for the rest of the season. Harry was glad his sport of choice involved much less fanfare, if one discounted Charity Lament.

Harry's contentment was cruelly dispelled when the door to the Three Broomsticks opened and he happened to look over.

It was Percy, with the blonde prefect. Harry felt his stomach sink as he watched them make their way to a table.

"What is it?" Astrid asked, leaning over to see what he was looking at. "Prefects? And the strict ones, too. Don't worry, Snape gave you permission. And it's not like they have any authority outside of the castle."

Harry let a shaky breath out, trying to look relieved. "Yeah, Filch checked me off and everything. Have you guys been to the Shrieking Shack yet?"

They hadn't, so it was agreed they'd go after collecting their brooms. The sports store happened to have gobstones supplies as well, which Harry was curious about. He only had the one set, but with a second he'd be able to more easily play against himself and practice more complicated techniques.

He trailed behind his friends as they left the Three Broomsticks. At the door, he glanced back into the pub. He zeroed in on Percy, his dark and coppery curls that shone under the candlelight. He and the blonde girl had their heads close together, talking animatedly.

Harry shut the door firmly behind himself, hoping they were just talking about OWLs.

On Wednesday, Harry made his way down into the archive. He had worked out who the blonde girl was. Penelope Clearwater, a fifth-year Ravenclaw prefect. She traded top spots in all classes with Percy, though somehow Percy was taking twelve subjects and not the usual nine. She was a halfblood, which shouldn't have been relevant, but meant she had a shared background with others raised in the magical world. Because it wasn't *just* magic. It was music, literature, art, food, *culture*. References to places, things, events Harry had never heard of but were common knowledge to others.

Harry struggled to understand why he had taken such an instant dislike to the older girl. Perhaps it was that if Percy was friends with her and needed to study for OWLs with a student in his year and at his level, there would be less time for Harry to read books from the Restricted Section. It would be hard striking a deal with someone else who had the pass.

That had to be it, it was the only logical explanation.

His stomach did a little flip when he saw Percy hunched over a stack of parchment, a quill held almost artfully in his hand. It was a familiar scene. Harry didn't understand why he was so nervous. Probably because of the illness he suspected Percy had. It didn't make much sense for Percy to hide it, since it was the kind of thing that people around him should know in case of an emergency. Unlike Harry's secrets.

“Evans,” Percy said, his glasses flashing in the flickering light as he looked up. “Have a seat.”

“Hi,” Harry said stupidly, sitting across from Percy. “What topic are you working on today? Transportation? I reckon there’s three categories. Land, sea, and air. Does space count as air? For land—”

“No, actually, I wanted to discuss the revelation you had in Honeydukes.”

“Right,” Harry said, failing to relax. It had to be his injection putting him on edge. “So, you have diabetes?”

Percy’s expression was blank, but there was something resigned about his posture. “I’m not sure if it’s the same as the muggle disease, but yes, I have diabetes.”

Harry resolved to learn everything about it. And other magical afflictions, obviously. It paid to be informed.

“For the muggle kind people can’t eat sugar since their body doesn’t process it,” Harry said. “You have a magical kind?”

Percy nodded. “Diabetes magicus. The healers tell me that my body cannot metabolize foreign magic I ingest. The cells in my body—which I am led to believe are a suite of biological structures of which we are made—the cells which produce litorin are destroyed by my immune system. Which means any external magic I consume—breathe, drink, eat—builds up to disastrous levels. I have to take injections of litorin to reduce it.”

Harry took all of this in. It sounded like Percy was allergic to magic, in a sense. “I—”

“Litorin is harvested from nogtails,” Percy continued. “Nogtails are notoriously shy and evasive, and incredibly hard to capture.”

“It’s expensive,” Harry concluded. “Is that why you get sick so often? Why isn’t there a potion?”

“It’s not *often*,” Percy said. “I merely have to be circumspect with what I ingest. As for a potion, one has yet to be developed. There are only a few people in the world with the same disease, and it’s not very profitable to develop potions only a few can use.”

They sat in silence for a few moments as Harry considered the enormity of Percy’s situation. There was magic in *everything*. Hogwarts was saturated with it. Everything they ate and drank was made with magic and often had magic *in* it. It was extremely limiting, extremely dangerous for Percy. And he could understand why Percy might not want anyone to know.

“Thank you for telling me,” Harry finally said. “You didn’t have to.”

Percy pushed his glasses up. “You came to the general conclusion on your own. No one else has. So, land transportation. Would skateboarding be an example?”

On Halloween, Harry was woken up by the delightful feeling of being eviscerated. He instantly identified the source of his pain based on its location, and curled into a ball. It was just his luck that, on a day he already wasn't looking forward to, something had to happen to make it worse.

He tried to get through his morning classes, but he wasn't practiced at hiding his pain and his friends immediately knew something was wrong. As soon as Ancient Runes let out, Cassius and Jasmine escorted him to the hospital wing. Carried him, really. Madam Pomfrey fluttered about Harry as he was deposited onto a bed.

Jasmine shot him an apologetic look as she and Cassius left. It wasn't even lunch yet, and they had their afternoon classes to get to. At least he wouldn't have to suffer through another tedious Defense lecture. Harry took solace in that, until his gut gave an almost vindictive throb, as if someone had clawed into him to squeeze his insides into pulp.

Harry really hated his life sometimes.

Since that first time on his birthday, another cursed day, Harry hadn't been put through this ordeal. If he had to go through it every single month he didn't know if he'd survive it. But if it *was* every month, maybe the pain wouldn't be so bad. Madam Pomfrey plied him with potions which eased the pain into a dull roar, but didn't offer complete relief. Harry was glad she didn't think he was overreacting, and she seemed concerned there was something *else* going on which made his...cycle...much worse than others.

Harry tried to sleep. It sounded much better than being awake. But the lunch bell rang, then the bells for classes, and Madam Pomfrey was busy doing whatever it was she did in the hospital wing.

Time stretched interminably. Harry's world was reduced to himself, his body, his suffering.

Then the hour for the Halloween feast arrived. The entire castle came alive with it. Madam Pomfrey stroked his hair gently and gave him a small bell he could ring to summon her, then she left to join the rest of the castle for the feast.

Harry buried his face in a pillow. He really didn't like Halloween.

He had dim memories from when he was very little of his grandparents leading him around Cokeworth, going door to door for boiled sweets and foiled squares of chocolate. Then his grandad had died, and his gran got terminally ill, and Harry learned it was the day their world had ended.

For everyone else, Halloween was the day Voldemort had been defeated. For Harry, it was the day his mum died.

Despite this, he *had* wanted to go to the feast. It would be Monty's first at Hogwarts. Harry wanted to see his little brother's reaction, share that first experience in a small and distant

way.

He knew the feast went on for hours, so Harry had time to think it over and summon what strength he had.

He rolled over, resolved to make it to the Great Hall, when suddenly there was a thunderous roar, and a terrible crash. The doors to the hospital wing flew past him, smashing through the windows in an awful din. A putrid stench assaulted his senses, and the hospital wing shook as something massive took one step, then another.

Harry grabbed his wand and forced himself up. He gripped the wood firmly, willing himself not to shake, and slid silently onto the floor. He padded to the curtains and slowly parted them.

“Promise food,” a guttural voice said.

Harry gawked at what he saw. Somehow, inexplicably, there was a bloody *mountain troll* in the hospital wing. The creature was huge, like a giant, bipedal, slimy rock. The loincloth and bulk identified the troll as male. His disproportionately small head knocked against the ceiling. His piggish eyes looked around in dim comprehension. A club as big as the troll's leg dragged on the floor. His giant nails were cracked and overgrown with a sickly fungus.

And Harry could understand every word it grunted.

“Little boy,” the troll muttered to himself. *“Sweet flesh. Hurts.”*

The troll swung his club, smashing through poles and curtains. Harry dropped to the floor to avoid the flying chunks of metal and stone.

“Promise boy.”

It was immensely disturbing to understand the creature. Trolls were dangerous. Despite their size they were fast. They weren't the most intelligent, but they had keen senses. Senses attuned to their preferred prey. Humans.

“Hurts much. Where boy.”

Harry steeled himself. Running wasn't an option. He could try hiding and waiting for help, but everyone was at the feast and the troll would tear the castle apart trying to get to him. Trolls had the raw strength for it.

Harry was forced to make a very quick decision when the troll's head jerked towards him.

“Flesh.”

The troll charged at him.

Harry stepped out of the curtains, he didn't want to be trapped, and stood in the middle of the aisle. He could feel the cold breeze at his back, rain lashing through the broken windows. The

troll took up most of his view, and the smell and clamor were making Harry's headache worse.

The troll swung his club.

"Protego!"

The club bounced off of his shield, and the troll stumbled back. Not much, it was too big, too heavy. But in those few seconds, Harry tried to think of everything he had ever read about trolls. The most pertinent thing was their thick, spell-resistant skin. Using magic directly on it would have no effect. Harry was too young, and his magic wasn't fully developed. And he was in a great deal of pain.

But Harry had one advantage.

He was pissed off.

He glared up at the troll, alive with fury. *"Bombarda maxima!"*

It was a powerful spell, one Harry had never cast before, but he wanted the troll to get the fuck away from him.

The floor exploded, and the troll flew back, crashing through the newly doorless entrance to the hospital wing and through the corridor, slamming against the wall at the far end. Harry stalked after it, vaguely hoping someone would show up. Madam Pomfrey, a prefect, *anyone*. They were all too busy at the feast, living it up, while Harry had to deal with this bullshit on top of his already less-than-stellar day and the continued betrayal of his own body.

The troll pushed himself up, growling at Harry. *"Hungry."*

"I don't give a shit!" Harry shouted. "Fuck off!"

Then, to Harry's horror, the door to the girls' lavatory opened and three little heads peeked out.

It was Monty, with his friend Ron and that Hermione girl. Harry had no idea what the hell they were doing together in a lavatory, and it didn't matter much at the moment. The troll had seen them too, and had apparently determined they were the preferable targets.

Harry ran forward, casting another *protego* as the troll tried to attack his brother. The club bounced off again, smacking the troll in the face. This only served to make the troll angrier.

Harry targeted the club. *"Incendio!"*

The club burst into flames, and the troll shrieked, a singularly abominable sound. A sharp pain made Harry wince, and he doubled over, clutching his gut.

"Ron! Get away from there!"

Harry's head swung around in surprise. It was Percy, frantically waving at his brother who was frozen in the doorway of the lavatory. Monty grabbed him, and Hermione, and ran towards the corridor Percy was in.

A heavy step was Harry's only warning, and he dropped to the ground, narrowly evading the troll's attempt to grab him. He searched his surroundings for anything he could use against the troll, his eyes landing on a tipped over suit of armor. He pointed his wand at it, and used another spell he had only ever read about, wishing fiercely it would work, if only a little.

"Piertotum locomotor!"

Harry watched in amazement, ignoring the abrupt wave of nausea making him dizzy, as the suit of armor jumped to life and threw itself at the troll. The troll stumbled back as the suit of armor grappled his head. Harry knew he couldn't sustain such complex movements for such a heavy object for long. He had to finish it off.

He pushed himself up, pointing his wand once more at the armor.

"Incalfacio."

It didn't work immediately. Harry was already thinking of his next move, but then the troll said something that made him pause.

"Hot."

The armor began changing color. The dull grey iron shifted to dark red, then red, and the troll started to screaming. The troll teetered, then fell to the floor, shaking the walls. Then the metal was glowing orange, yellow, blindingly white like a star going supernova, and the screaming cut off as the troll's throat burned away. But it didn't stop, the iron kept heating until it began to melt.

Molten iron encased the troll's head and chest, running down its body, leaving smoking trails. The smell grew impossibly worse, like a landfill on fire.

Harry sank to his knees, his face twisted in agony. He squeezed his eyes shut, but his ears still rang with the dying noises of the troll, its garbled words only he could understand thanks to the fish which circled innocently above him.

"Is it over?" Monty asked. Harry didn't bother looking at his brother. He didn't have the strength.

"That was wicked," Ron said with astonishment.

"He...he just killed it!" Hermione protested.

"Better it than us," Ron muttered.

"You three are very lucky you didn't get hurt," Percy said. Harry suddenly felt embarrassed to be sprawled on the floor near a half-melted troll. He probably had bits of troll all over himself.

Nevertheless, he stayed on the floor until he heard footsteps pounding towards them. He opened his eyes and raised his wand, wondering if the troll had allies. It was stupid to assume there was only one roaming the castle. Stupid for it to manage to get into the castle at all.

He lowered his wand when he saw it was only Professors McGonagall, Snape, and Quirrell. Harry focused on Quirrell, who paused to regard him, swooned, then collapsed in a dead faint. Harry didn't buy it for a second.

"What on earth is going on here?" McGonagall demanded. She sounded furious, but if Harry didn't know better he would have thought her relieved. "What were you thinking, Mr. Evans? Fighting a fully grown mountain troll? You're only in third year!"

Before Harry could respond, Madam Pomfrey came running down the corridor. "Mr. Evans! You shouldn't be out of bed! You silly child, I—" she stopped talking once she saw the state of the hospital wing, specifically the troll-shaped hole through the entrance. "No," she gasped, placing a hand over her heart.

"I was in the hospital wing," Harry said, forcing himself to stand. His legs were shaky, and he was ready to pass out. "The troll broke in and attacked me."

"I see," McGonagall said, focusing on another target. "And you three! Why are you not in your dormitories?"

Harry listened to the first-years speak over each other trying to explain. Then Percy decided to answer for them.

"Miss Granger was taking some time to herself after Mr. Weasley made a rude remark about her," Percy said. Harry smiled faintly at how authoritative he sounded. "She was missing during the feast, and in the chaos of returning to our dormitories, Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley went in search of her. I did a headcount and realized the three were missing. Once the other first-years were safely in the common room, I took it upon myself to find these three."

Madam Pomfrey looked between Harry and the hospital wing, then hurried off to repair what damage she could. Harry listened to her aggressively casting spells. He leaned against the wall, not sure what was going to happen now. Quirrell was still on the ground, his face convincingly slack.

It was one thing to pit Harry against a troll. It was another to endanger his little brother in the process.

"Are you feeling well, Mr. Evans?"

Harry looked up at Snape, who impassively regarded him.

"No," Harry said shortly. He looked at the troll, what remained of it. The iron was starting to cool. It was sort of like armor. Trolls were terrible with wearing armor, they tended to damage or lose it. It was kind of funny, and Harry felt faint and giddy. Then pain lanced through him again. Everything was so *heavy*.

“Since you weren’t at the feast, you missed Quirrell rushing in to inform us all of a troll in the dungeon.”

“This isn’t the dungeon,” Harry pointed out. “There isn’t even an entrance to it nearby.”

“I know,” Snape said in a low voice, his eyes darting to Quirrell. “Regardless, you performed admirably this evening. Fifty points to Slytherin, for services to the castle.”

Harry was glad he had a wall to support him. It was too much of a shock. Snape strode towards Quirrell, and Harry hoped he would kick the man awake. But he just used a simple reviving charm and Quirrell groggily sat up, clutching his turban which had begun to slip.

“Mr. Evans.”

Harry turned away from Quirrell and noticed McGonagall had approached him, with her Gryffindors in tow. She had her usual stern look, but her expression had softened. Harry glanced at Percy, who looked back approvingly. Harry felt his cheeks warm, and chose instead to look at the three first-years staring at him.

“Yes, professor?”

“These three have something to tell you,” McGonagall said.

Monty was beaming up at him. “Thank you,” he said.

Harry didn’t even hear what Ron and Hermione had to say. It didn’t matter.

Harry smiled back at his brother. “Any time.”

Chapter End Notes

The anti-Hermione sentiments are cracking me up

700 Quidditch Fouls

Chapter Summary

November 1991

Harry was stuck in hospital for a week after the troll attack. The story which circulated was that he was suffering from magical exhaustion. In reality, his adrenal glands failed to make enough cortisol while he was in an extremely stressful situation, putting his life at risk. Madam Pomfrey contacted her colleague at St. Mungo's to secure him an appointment for the upcoming Christmas holiday, instead of Easter as originally planned.

He didn't mind it so much, being laid up for a week. He was still experiencing severe cramping from his ovaries struggling to work in a body he strongly felt they didn't belong in. His friends came by to bring him homework and notes, and a few other Slytherins visited like Charity and Killian from the gobstones team. Harry even got a visit from Monty and his friends. It seemed he and Ron had bonded with Hermione over their shared troll trauma. It was a better outcome than Harry had hoped for.

Hermione was constantly in the library. Harry had never seen his brother there. People raised in muggle homes needed to work harder than their peers, and while it had only been two months and Monty was just eleven, if he treated magic like a novelty and not a serious endeavor, Harry feared for his future. A dedicated student like Hermione would help Monty keep up with his classes.

Killing the troll had turned Harry into a minor celebrity, according to his friends, and the gain of fifty points had placed Slytherin at a significant lead. He hadn't told anyone about his suspicions regarding Quirrell. He hadn't been in class since, but word was that defense had got worse. Quirrell could barely get through a sentence.

Harry didn't believe Quirrell's act, but also couldn't understand *why* Quirrell was acting. What was his goal?

He was determined to talk to Professor Snape about it.

Madam Pomfrey set him free on a dreary Friday evening, shortly after dinner, giving him vials of dilute Calming Draught to take in the event his body tried to kill him out of stress. He

added them to the rest of his stash. Harry resolved to learn some spatial and gravity charms. His pockets were getting heavy.

He first tried to find Snape in his dungeon office, but it was empty. Harry spotted the Bloody Baron and asked him if he had seen Snape, and the ghost mournfully directed him to the staff room. A little annoyed as he had started off on the first floor, Harry left the dungeons. Happily, the staff room was in a corridor just off the entrance hall. As Harry was crossing it, someone small collided with him.

“Sorry!” Monty said, grinning sheepishly at him. “Evans? You’re better now?”

That was debatable, but Monty didn’t need to know that. “Good as new. Where are you running off to?”

“Oh, well,” Monty said. “Snape...I mean, Professor Snape took a library book Hermione checked out, and I was going to ask if I could have it back.”

“Which book?” Harry asked. “I could ask him for you.”

“Really?” Monty asked. “I was the one he took it from, so it should be me who asks.”

“I wouldn’t exactly be going out of my way,” Harry said. “I was going to talk to him myself. Which book is it?”

Monty looked conflicted for a moment, then said, “*Quidditch Through the Ages*.”

Harry grinned. “Studying for the game tomorrow?”

Monty deflated a little. “No one was supposed to know. Now everyone’s talking about it, and they either think I’ll be brilliant, or that I’m going to fall off my broom.”

Harry hesitated, then patted Monty on the shoulder. “Your father was the team captain, and one of the best chasers in school history. You can see the trophies he got in the trophy room. And other Potters, too.”

Monty’s eyes sparkled. “Really? You think I’ll do well?” Then he narrowed his eyes. “Aren’t you in Slytherin? Should you be supporting me?”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe not. Most of my friends are on our house team. But it’s just a game, M—Potter. Is the point winning, or having fun?”

“According to Wood, winning,” Monty said.

Harry squeezed his brother’s shoulder, then let go. “Either way, good luck, though I doubt you’ll need it. I’ll go speak with Professor Snape about getting your book. Wait for me here, okay?”

Monty nodded, then took a seat on the grand staircase. Harry looked at him for a moment, his messy black hair, his repaired glasses, how after weeks of regular meals his robes didn’t hang off of him. He turned away, and walked down the corridor to the staff room.

Harry knocked several times, and after there was no response he opened the door.

“...keep your eyes on all three heads at once?”

Snape was sitting in a chair with his robes pulled up over one leg. The leg was a mess, like it had been used for a chew toy. A blood-filled chew toy. Filch was passing Snape bandages.

Harry stepped in and shut the door behind him.

“Excuse me, professor?”

“Evans?” Snape said, dropping his robes. “What are you doing here?”

“I had a question, sir.”

“Thank you, Mr. Filch,” Snape said, taking the bandages the old man was still holding. “If you could please excuse us.”

Filch grumbled and stumped off, Mrs. Norris at his heels. Harry waited for the door to close again before speaking.

“Why don’t you go to Madam Pomfrey?” he asked, taking a tentative step forward. “That looks really bad. Did you get bit by a cerberus?”

Snape stared at him, his face completely blank. “Why would you come to that conclusion, Mr. Evans?”

“Well, you mentioned three heads, and there are only so many creatures with three heads,” Harry said. “You’re still alive, so it wasn’t a runespoor. And those looked like bite marks from a dog. Or three dogs. I didn’t know we had a cerberus here. Why didn’t you play music?”

Snape kept staring. “Why would I do such a thing?”

Harry frowned. “The myth of Orpheus and the cerberus? He plays his lyre to put the cerberus to sleep. That myth comes from the effect music has on actual cerberi, not that the muggles know that. It’s in *Monsters of the Mediterranean*.”

Snape looked at the ceiling. “I see. And why were you reading that book?”

“Because Professor Quirrell is useless. That’s actually one of the things I wanted to talk about. He said something strange to me the other week.”

Harry recounted Quirrell’s words and his subsequent battle with the troll, and the words the troll had said.

Snape didn’t respond for a moment, a strange expression on his face. “The headmaster assures me that the troll getting loose was a complete accident.

“Getting loose?” Harry asked.

Snape ignored him. “Unfortunately, there is nothing I can do to improve your defense education. I have been trying for years, which is why you and your housemates have the privilege of learning outside of class. You said you had another question, Mr. Evans?”

Harry was annoyed at his concerns about Quirrell being dismissed, and was curious about the specific words Snape had chosen to use. Setting it aside to examine later, he asked, “I heard you’ve confiscated the only copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages*. I wanted to check it out.”

“Ah, yes,” Snape said, sounding almost gleeful. He fished the book out of his robes and passed it to Harry. “I caught Potter with it outside of the castle.”

Harry took the book, even more confused. “That isn’t against the rules, sir.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “And?”

Harry opened his mouth, decided against saying anything, and closed it again. “Nothing, sir. Thank you.”

As Harry opened the door to leave, he turned back and said, “You really ought to see Madam Pomfrey about that.”

“Out, Evans.”

Harry quickly shut the door, walking back to the entrance hall to give the book to Monty. “Don’t let him see you with this,” he said. “I told Professor Snape I wanted to read it.”

Monty smiled at him. “Thanks!”

“See you at the game tomorrow,” Harry said, watching his brother practically skip up the stairs with his book. He assumed Hermione had found it for him. She was already having an influence.

Smiling to himself, Harry walked past the grand staircase and took the stairs that led down into the dungeon.

On the morning of the fateful quidditch match, the skies were clear and the air was crisp. Breakfast was a madhouse. The owls, the food, people shouting support or disparagement—mostly at Monty—Astrid whispering furiously with Viridia and Marcus, Terence grimly eating a sausage. Harry tried not to look at his brother too often, he didn’t want anyone to notice it. After two months in school the majority of people had got over trying to get a look at Monty. But this was a monumental day, Monty’s first quidditch game.

Harry risked a look at the Gryffindor table, and was happy to see Monty was eating, albeit with little enthusiasm. The seeker was arguably the most important player. Games ended when the snitch was caught, and it was extraordinarily rare that the team with the snitch lost.

It was a lot of pressure for anyone. Harry imagined it was worse for Monty, being eleven and the Boy Who Lived. People looked at him and saw a hero, a paragon of virtue, a great wizard. To Harry, Monty was just a kid thrown into a new and overwhelming situation he wasn't sure how to handle.

The Slytherin team rose as one from the table. Across the room, the Gryffindor team did the same, though Monty was a few seconds out of sync. Harry looked up at the head table, where Snape was smirking and McGonagall looked at her team with pride. She glanced at the Slytherins, and her expression faltered.

"Come on," Phoebe said, pulling on Harry's sleeve. "I want to get good seats. It's Astrid's first game!"

The entire school had turned out to see Monty Potter's first match. The stands had been expanded, so there was plenty of room.

Phoebe didn't care. She was squeezing the life out of Harry's upper arm, and her other hand was twisted in Jasmine's robes.

It had been a brutal game. The chasers were fairly evenly matched, though Marcus had left his position to body check Monty while he and Terence were going for the snitch. Monty had been ahead of Terence, the Nimbus was *fast*. Viridia chewed Marcus out for playing dirty and getting a foul, with Gryffindor taking a penalty shot. Astrid scowled as the quaffle soared through the rings she assiduously guarded. Not a single one had got past her.

Lucian and Peregrine were more vicious beaters than the Weasley twins, but their teamwork was not as good.

Lee Jordan, a Gryffindor who Harry was in many classes with, was commentating. He obviously favored his own team. So had Nymphadora Tonks, but Harry thought she was funnier.

Harry wasn't sure Monty knew what he was doing. He was wandering around, doing loop-the-loops, staying in one place for a long time and looking around. He wasn't tracking Terence at all. He was tiny compared to everyone else, especially bulky teenagers like the Slytherin beaters. Seeing him among the other players was absurd. First-years should definitely not be playing quidditch on the house team.

Harry's opinion was validated when Monty began jerking around on his broom. Harry frowned when Monty didn't stop.

"Give me your binoculars," he said, sticking his hand out to Adrian.

"I better not miss anything," Adrian muttered, surrendering them.

Harry pressed the binoculars to his eyes, impressed by the clarity as he searched for his brother. When he found him, his blood ran cold.

Monty was terrified, holding onto his broom for dear life.

Harry felt around in his pocket and downed two vials of Calming Draught. Thankfully, no one noticed.

“What’s Potter doing?” Cassius asked.

Adrian snatched the binoculars back. “I thought he could fly. He’s lost control of his broom! What a joke.”

“Someone must be jinxing it,” Harry said, watching helplessly as his brother’s life was on the line.

“Not possible,” Adrian said. “That’s a Nimbus, pros use that. If any wanker could jinx a broom, games would be way more deadly.”

“Why isn’t Wood calling timeout?” Harry asked. “What about Madam Hooch?”

“Who cares, Flint just scored another point!”

Harry looked at the professors' stand, wondering why no one was doing anything. He had no idea how to fix the broom, or what was going on with it. Had someone jinxed it beforehand? Was it in progress? If Monty fell, Harry could slow his momentum, use cushioning charms so he didn’t get too badly hurt. Hopefully someone else would, an adult. The adult refereeing the match, useless as she was turning out to be.

He was relieved to see someone *was* doing something. Snape was staring at Monty, muttering a counterjinx. A very long counterjinx, he wasn’t even pausing for breath. Which meant he had tried to dispel it by other means, but the spell was being actively cast. On instinct, Harry glanced at Quirrell. Quirrell was also staring, his mouth hanging open but not forming words. Then Quirrell vanished from sight, presumably falling over, and Snape had leapt up and was hopping around strangely.

Fearing the broom would finally throw Monty off, Harry looked back to the game and saw his brother hurtling at the ground. People around him leapt up to watch. Harry looked to where he would hit the ground if he didn’t pull up. He pointed his wand through the two people in front of him and softened as much of the ground as he could.

Monty tumbled off his broom, coming to a stop with barely a scratch. He bent over as if to throw up, and something small and gold fell out of his mouth and into his hands.

“I’ve got the snitch!” Monty cried, waving it around.

The crowd went mad.

“No way,” Harry whispered, falling back into his seat. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Harry spent most of November in a simmering rage. Madam Pomfrey would ask him every day how he felt, and Harry would honestly tell her that he was angry. Often.

It could have been the testosterone, and it was a good excuse with Madam Pomfrey. But Harry knew it wasn't. It was that his brother, an eleven-year-old child, had nearly died, and nothing was being done about it. Nothing.

The aurors hadn't been called. No one capable of performing such a jinx had been turned over. The broom was still in Monty's possession, despite it no doubt carrying the traces of whoever's magic had tampered with it. Monty was still on the quidditch team, his winning by a one-in-a-million fluke overshadowing his very life being imperiled.

Slytherins were outraged at the win. Viridia had screamed at Wood for not calling a timeout and putting his youngest player's life at risk, and Madam Hooch had got an earful too. Marcus tried to argue that Monty hadn't technically *caught* the snitch, given he had nearly swallowed it. He hadn't seen it, hadn't shown any prowess in capturing it. It was random chance. Though, given how fantastic such a thing was, Harry had his doubts about how *random* such a win truly was. Snitches were supposed to be spell-resistant too, and yet he had seen with his own eyes how such claims were at best hopeful.

He tried to control his temper. He knew that occlumency was a clearing of the mind, freeing oneself of thoughts and emotions. Snape had called him a natural occlumens, and Harry's first idea was that he was naturally empty-headed. Since that wasn't the case, there had to be some other aspect to it. Something that would help him tolerate sitting in defense class for hours every week, switching the covers of his defense book with other books so he could read and block out Quirrell's affected stutter.

As he did every Friday, after class he separated from his friends and went to the library. Seeing Percy usually put him in a better mood. Percy was more mature than Harry's other friends, more serious, which, as someone who had largely raised himself, Harry appreciated. Except for Cassius and Jasmine, Harry spent far more time in the library than the rest of his friends. He just couldn't deal with all the noise in the common room while studying, and Charity would often hound him into a gobstones game. Harry liked playing around too, but that was what holidays were for. He was at school to study, to learn and practice magic. And magic was fun.

That day, Harry noticed that the collar of Percy's robe was slightly askew. Harry's eyes caught with frightening precision on his exposed neck, and a thin chain of gold that glittered there.

Harry swallowed drily. He wasn't an idiot, he knew he fancied Percival Septimus Weasley. He also didn't know what to think about being attracted to a boy.

His gran had never said anything prejudiced, nor had he heard anything like that at Hogwarts. But his summer friends in Cokeworth had made a few comments about *poofs* or someone being *bent*. Harry hadn't thought much about it, hadn't thought about it applying to himself. He didn't know if any such labels *did* apply to him, given his condition. Or if Percy liked boys.

And, very secretly, Harry wondered if liking a boy made him less of one. If it was a *girl* thing.

Harry didn't believe that, not really. It was confusing. He tried not to think about it too much.

He *knew* who Percy liked. Penelope Clearwater. He'd seen them studying together in the library on other days, doing prefect rounds together. Pretty, perfect, prefect Penelope bloody Clearwater.

Harry sat down in an even worse mood, tearing his eyes away from Percy's neck, of all the stupid things to drool over.

"Are you alright, Evans?" Percy asked.

Harry sighed, and looked over at Percy, glad the dim lighting made it hard to see his blush. "Just got out of Quirrell's class. Utter bollocks. I don't think I've learned a thing about defense in any class, really. We've got a club for it in Slytherin."

"Ravenclaw does as well," Percy said, and Harry's heart sank. Penelope Clearwater would be first against the wall. "I have attempted a similar organization within Gryffindor, but my housemates are, in general, rather headstrong."

"Make it a house rivalry thing," Harry suggested. "Look up exam scores for Slytherin. I'm sure they're better than Gryffindor, for Defense and very likely Potions."

"And History of Magic," Percy said, steepling his fingers. He looked quite villainous, but a swotty villain. Whatever, Harry wanted a framed picture, he was gorgeous. "I've looked them up before, for my own edification, but I never thought to use them to spur my cohort into improved academic performance. Thank you, Evans."

Then Percy smiled at him.

Harry's mind immediately went blank. Perhaps that was the key to occlumency. It was Percy all along.

He collected himself enough to smile back.

"You're getting your braces removed soon?" Percy asked, his eyes flicking down.

Harry's smile faltered, but he let himself be drawn into a conversation about muggle dental care. He knew, deep down, he didn't have a chance with Percy. Percy was older, had ambitious goals based on how much time he devoted to his studies and his prefect duties, and would probably forget all about Harry as soon as he left Hogwarts.

It was only a crush. It was meant to hurt a little.

Retainers and Reflections

Chapter Summary

Christmas 1991

On the last day of term, Harry found himself waiting outside of the Potions classroom. It was Professor Snape's last class of the day, with the first year Gryffindors and Slytherins. Harry wanted to look inside, see how his brother was faring, but knew Snape loathed interruptions. So he leaned against the wall, running his tongue over the braces which, after straining to correct his teeth for nearly four years, would finally be removed.

When the bell rang, the Gryffindors were first out of the door in a rush to escape the confines of the dungeons. Neville Longbottom was being led out by a charred and smoking Seamus Finnigan. Dean Thomas, Lavender Brown, and Parvati Patil followed soon after, then Monty and his friends. The three looked at Harry curiously, and Harry was about to greet them when Draco Malfoy's shrill voice cut through.

"I do feel sorry for all those people who have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas because they're not wanted at home."

Monty's expression twisted Harry's heart. Ron had gone red, and Hermione looked simultaneously annoyed and concerned.

"Not all of us have the privilege of having families," Harry said, looking down at Draco. "Mocking orphans? Bad form, Malfoy. What *would* your father think?"

Draco froze for a moment, then scowled. "What's it to you, Evans?"

Vince and Greg looked at each other, not sure if they should back Draco against an upper year of their own house.

"Potter's not the only one whose parents were killed," Harry said, leaning forward. "You should be careful about whose dead families you insult."

"What's going on out here?"

Snape had emerged from the classroom, looming over all of them.

Harry slowly moved back, a little embarrassed to be caught arguing with a first-year. "Nothing, sir. I was just telling Malfoy that he ought to be a bit more circumspect in his language."

“He was making fun of people having dead parents,” Ron piped up. Harry met Snape’s eyes and raised his eyebrows as the first-years began accusing each other.

“Silence,” Snape said, shutting them all up. “Mr. Malfoy, five points from Slytherin for your indelicate words. In the future, I suggest you keep such base opinions to yourself. As for the rest of you, get out of my sight before I decide to ruin both Slytherin and Gryffindor’s chances at the house cup!”

The kids scrambled to get away, leaving Harry alone with Snape.

“You didn’t have to do that, professor,” Harry said.

“I am well aware, Mr. Evans,” Snape said. “Though perhaps it would be wise to imitate your housemates and not antagonize the son of Lucius Malfoy.”

“I’ll take that under advisement, sir,” Harry said, following Snape out of the dungeon.

Snape sighed but didn’t respond, leading Harry past the entrance hall, where there was a small traffic jam as Hagrid wrangled a giant tree into the Great Hall, onto the grounds, and through the gates. There, Snape put his hand on Harry’s shoulder and apparated them to an alley near the dentist’s office.

“I was wondering,” Harry began, watching as Snape transfigured their robes into something more muggle appropriate, and charming Frankie the babelfish imperceptible, “since we’re already out, and I’m staying at the castle for the holiday, if I could stop by my house to get something?”

Snape raised his eyebrow. “Your house? I assume you are referring to whatever hovel you squat in during the summer?”

“Mmhmm,” Harry said, not trusting himself to speak. “I wanted to get some Christmas presents.”

“Christmas,” Snape repeated. Harry half hoped he would begin to rant about the bastardized consumer holiday, but he had no such luck. Snape simply waited for him to continue.

“Muggle presents,” Harry said. “I can’t owl order those.”

“Fortunately for you, Mr. Evans,” Snape said, “I have some business of my own in Cokeworth. After your teeth are seen to, you shall have an hour to conduct any holiday-related business you may have there.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, smiling up at Snape. Snape looked vaguely disgusted by this display of positive emotion and spun away, stalking to the entrance to the orthodontics clinic. Harry kept smiling as he followed. He was finally getting his braces off!

Harry resisted the urge to use his tongue to pop out his retainers. They felt tight and uncomfortable in his mouth, but he'd be able to remove them while eating, which was already a step up from braces. He had to wear them full time for a year, then see if he could wear them at night only. He had particularly migratory teeth. In pictures, his mum had fairly straight teeth, as did both of his grandparents. Harry could only assume his dental issues came from the other side of his family.

After his appointment, Snape apparated them to Cokeworth with a reminder for Harry to be at his house in an hour. Harry sprinted to his own home. He needed muggle money, and something else.

Once inside, Harry went to the shelf where the photo albums were kept. He loathed parting with any pictures, and wasn't sure how safe they would be with an eleven-year-old. But he couldn't use magic outside of Hogwarts without consequence, so he shoved the entire album into his bag. He had spent weeks mastering extension and feather-light charms specifically for this. And all the medication he carried around.

He ran out of the house and through Cokeworth to Tesco. He grabbed a basket and hurried to the chocolate and sweets aisle. Harry had no idea what everyone would like, so he got some of everything, half going into his basket, the rest into his bag. He checked his watch—his great-grandfather's watch, a retirement gift from the mine—and went to the checkout. He dodged the checkout lady's questions and ran out with his bag of sweets, arriving at Spinner's End just as Snape stepped out of his door.

Harry doubled over, breathing heavily. His binder felt much too tight. Madam Pomfrey was still researching magical alternatives to keep his chest flat without compression.

"Just in time, Mr. Evans," Snape said, ignoring Harry's disheveled state and grabbing his shoulder. Before Harry could catch his breath, he was whisked away.

Harry was used to an empty castle for Christmas. That year was different. Few people had chosen to go home, preferring instead to experience the Hogwarts Christmas and have ready access to Monty Potter. Slytherin was the one exception to this, with most leaving. Of his friends, only Astrid stayed behind, and she attached herself to him like a barnacle. Even his dormitory wasn't safe, as the same rule that prevented boys from entering the girls' dormitories didn't apply in the reverse. Harry wondered what would happen if he tried to get into Astrid's room, but was afraid of the answer.

His retainers had caused something of a stir, as he had told no one about the change. It was generally assumed that whatever punishment people had imagined he was experiencing—as believed by those with no exposure to the muggle world—had been reduced. It was true, in a sense, though the retainers were still awkward to wear. He got to pop them out during meals, drawing looks of horror and disgust which he privately took delight in. Being magical gradually inured one to oddity, and his dental accoutrements were novel.

Monty staying at the castle made Harry both happy and very sad. He was glad to see his brother around, but Monty clearly didn't want to go back to their aunt's house.

Harry knew his brother had been abused. Locked in a cupboard, forced to do most of the chores, not given enough food. He imagined worse, more horrific incidents, the things Monty wouldn't talk about. He didn't know if there were magical therapists, or anyone he would trust to keep Monty's secrets without some serious oaths backing it, but Monty needed someone to talk to. Somewhere he *wanted* to go home to.

On Christmas Eve, Harry left presents out for the house-elves to deliver, except for two. He didn't trust the house-elves with the identities of the recipients. There was no knowing who they would tell. Like the portraits and the ghosts, the house-elves were loyal to the castle, to the headmaster.

Harry didn't trust Dumbledore as far as he could throw him. He had far too much power over the education and politics of their world. Not many in Slytherin were fond of the headmaster, for a variety of reasons. Because their families disliked him, because of laws he did or didn't help pass, the educational standards at Hogwarts, the magic they were *allowed* to learn, the food, his eccentric clothing...

Harry had a more personal grudge: the threats against Monty's life. The troll. The jinxed broom. Two strikes.

He didn't know how Monty's survival of the Killing Curse had even spread. Everyone else who had been there was dead. Someone had taken his baby brother away and left him with Petunia Dursley. Someone had examined the scar on his head, got a picture of it still bleeding soon after their mum had died. Harry strongly suspected Dumbledore was involved. He stuck his abnormally long nose into everything.

As such, Harry had a plan for his brother's Christmas present. He had made copies of some of the pictures in the album. Moving pictures of Lily at school, as a prefect and later Head Girl. Lily with her friends. Pictures of their grandparents, of Lily and Petunia before Hogwarts separated them. He had nicked a few picture frames from Tesco, which he transfigured into better material, decorated with lilies. He didn't have any nice paper to wrap it in, so he scraped ink off parchment he'd saved from old assignments and used that.

He snuck out after midnight, moving swiftly through the shadowed corridors to a place he had never been before, the Owlery. Many of the owls were asleep, their heads tucked under their wings or buried in breast feathers. He spotted Monty's owl immediately. She was pure white, glowing in the moonlight. He had charmed himself so thoroughly his skin buzzed with it. Scent, sight, sound. Owls were expert hunters. One false move and the entire Owlery would come alive.

Harry carefully approached the snowy owl, touching her perch lightly to awake her. Her eyes opened immediately, and she cocked her head. Harry moved his wand in a circle, to ensure their little talk wouldn't be overheard by any school owls.

"Hedwig," Harry said. "Can you deliver something for me? To Monty? It's a Christmas present."

She hooted softly. Frankie was hit or miss with animals. He got a good impression of what Hedwig was communicating, though. She wanted to know why she should trust him.

“This is a really big secret,” Harry said. “I’ve never told anyone.”

Hedwig shuffled forward on her perch.

“He’s my brother,” Harry said. “We have the same mum, Lily Evans.”

Hedwig hooted again, then nipped at his hair.

“I can’t tell you that,” Harry said. “It was our mum’s decision. I wish we had grown up together. It was what she wanted.”

Hedwig watched him unblinkingly, then stretched out a leg. Harry held up the package for Monty and tied it on. “Thank you.”

Hedwig nipped his finger, then flew away on silent wings. When she disappeared from sight, headed for Gryffindor Tower, Harry sought out the second owl he needed a favor from.

After seeing Percy receive the *Daily Prophet* every day since the start of term, Harry could recognize his owl. He’d even got the screech owl’s name. Hermes. It was such a Percy name for an owl.

Harry tapped on Hermes’ post, and the owl’s face tufted as he woke, his fierce eyes glaring at Harry.

“I’ve got a present for Percival Septimus Weasley,” Harry said, very seriously.

Hermes cocked his head, but unlike Hedwig he didn’t need convincing. He had delivered notes to Harry before. Percy’s package was a bit bulkier than Monty’s. Monty’s was certainly the more meaningful gift. Anonymously sending pictures of the Evans family was reckless, but Monty had been denied all knowledge of his heritage. He was entitled to it, and it was the least Harry could do.

For Percy, Harry could admit he had gone a bit overboard. He had sent all of his friends muggle sweets and chocolates, things common in the muggle world but foreign to most witches and wizards. Since Percy couldn’t have any magical confections, and Harry hadn’t known what Percy would favor if he could, Harry had gathered a wide array of muggle ones. Rhubarb and custard boiled sweets, pink sugar mice, licorice allsorts, mint humbugs, fruit pastilles, Harry’s favorite Mars bar, Galaxy, Violet Crumble, Twix, Maltesers, an Aero. Bounty, just in case, even if it was the worst.

Hermes gravely took the bundle Harry had made from an old calico kerchief, moss green with brown leaves and flowers in yellow and orange. It reminded Harry of Percy’s eyes

He was too shy to include a note, but Harry hoped it was obvious who it was from.

Christmas morning began with Astrid crashing into Harry's spelled curtains. He fixed her broken nose and allowed himself to be drawn into the common room, where presents had been piled under their enormous tree.

There were few people, and they all sat together. Your house was your family at Hogwarts, and that meant more to some than others. So the seventh-years sat with Flora and Hestia, and a mousey first-year girl named Tracey Davis. Harry had seen the bespectacled girl talking with Lily Moon. Harry wasn't entirely sure how the first-years were getting on, but he was glad they were making friends with each other. She smiled shyly as Viridia passed her a present.

Harry got mostly practical gifts from his friends. Parchment, quills, ink, chocolates from Honeydukes, a book on the history of the Hogwarts library.

"You spend a lot of time in the library," Astrid explained. "Are you planning on being a librarian?"

"Maybe," Harry said, having never considered that before. It would be an interesting job, and he could read all the books he wanted.

"What the hell is this?" Astrid asked, holding up a bag of Skittles.

"Skittles," Harry said.

"What's it do?" Astrid asked, squeezing the bag. It crinkled.

Harry thought her question over. "Turns your tongue different colors for a bit."

"Wicked," Astrid said, tearing the bag open.

Trays of breakfast foods popped up around them as wrapping paper vanished. Christmas breakfast was always served in the common room, as they weren't expected anywhere until Christmas dinner. Crumpets and muffins, butter and jam, tea and coffee. Harry knew from experience not to fill up too much. Tracey grimaced at the bitter taste of the coffee, then dumped cream and sugar into her cup. Astrid had thankfully only had a single Skittle.

At Christmas dinner, since there were so many students they all sat at their house tables. Harry saw the Weasleys had matching sweaters. The twins had letters on theirs, and Harry was sure they switched them. Monty had got one too, a lovely emerald green. He was ensconced by Weasleys.

It was painful to see Monty with another family, to see him so happy. Harry couldn't give him that. He couldn't be the older brother, not with a dead teen mum and a Death Eater dad. Not as a Slytherin. It hurt, but Harry was grateful the Weasleys could give his brother a chance in their fold.

He glanced at Percy and saw he had a purple sweater with a large letter P. For prefect, perhaps, surely he didn't need to be tagged like the twins. Harry froze when Percy looked

over at him, then smiled slightly. Percy nodded, then turned back to the conversation he had been having with another prefect.

“So,” Astrid said. Harry looked over and saw she had a predatory grin. “That’s why you’re always in the library. Tall, dork, and handsome, eh?”

“I’ve no idea what you’re referring to,” Harry said, picking up a cracker. He held it out to Tracey, who was sitting across from him, and together they unleashed chaos upon the table. Several mice fell out of the smoke, stealing bits of food before scurrying off. Tracey got a hat shaped like a dragon. It occasionally roared and breathed fire. Harry got a little figurine of a thestral that walked around and could even fly. Astrid didn’t believe him until he convinced her to touch its scaly flesh.

At the head table, Hagrid was hollering for more wine. McGonagall was drinking too, and someone had put a top hat on her. It kept falling off. Hagrid kissed her messily on the cheek, and McGonagall let out a girlish giggle.

Astrid went eerily still next to him.

“What’s your problem with McGonagall?” Harry asked quietly. “Why do you hate her?”

“I’ll tell you if you tell me what that’s really for,” she said, poking at his retainers. He had popped them out to eat.

“Deal,” Harry easily said.

Astrid whispered the story to him.

McGonagall had been married to Astrid’s favorite uncle, Elphinstone Urquart. Elphinstone had been a career auror, one of the best during Voldemort’s time. He had changed the spelling of his name to distance himself from their family and their dark associations. Urquhart Rackharrow had been a notorious inventor of curses, and some of her extended family had sided with Voldemort. Astrid’s parents hadn’t, though, so they were on good terms with Elphinstone. Astrid had grown up knowing McGonagall as her aunt, McGonagall’s brothers as her uncles, their children as cousins. Then, after a freak venomous tentacula accident while on a case, Elphinstone had died.

After the funeral, McGonagall cut off all contact with Astrid’s parents, and Astrid herself.

“She won’t even call on me in class,” Astrid hissed. “She’s why I love quidditch so much. She took me to my first game.”

“Maybe she’s still in mourning,” Harry suggested, just as McGonagall giggled again.

“Right,” Astrid said flatly. “What about you? No one knows anything about your family.”

Harry looked at his retainers sitting innocuously on the tablecloth. “Well, those are to keep my teeth straight. It’s a muggle invention.”

“That’s all?” Astrid asked. “Why don’t you get Madam Pomfrey to fix them?”

Harry hesitated, then said, “I like them, and it’s a reminder that not everything can be solved with magic. My gran died of a muggle disease. Magic can’t fix that.”

“Was she a muggle?” Astrid asked.

“She was,” Harry said, and Astrid let the subject drop.

Harry found one last present when he went to bed on Christmas. It was a long roll of bandage that looked woven from thread-of-silver and unicorn hair. He could see tiny runes stitched into the fabric, glowing with magic.

In the safety of his curtains, he removed his robes and his binder. He avoided touching the soft swell of his chest. He had thought about eating less to make it go away, but he had heard stories about how dangerous that was. It wasn’t worth his life. It wasn’t even that big, not compared to some of the heavier boys in school.

The little thestral explored his bed, pawing at his blanket.

Harry took a breath, then began wrapping the bandage around his chest. To his surprise, it unraveled itself and completed the job. He looked down in amazement. It looked as flat as any other bandage, like maybe he’d got a wound wrapped up. He hesitantly ran his hand over it, and found the bandage was flush with his skin. He could barely tell it was there.

Harry smiled to himself. He had a pretty good idea of who his anonymous gift-giver was.

He hoped Snape liked Parma Violets.

The day after Christmas, Astrid had talked Harry into flying around the pitch with her. As Harry waited for her to come back with the brooms, he spotted a snowy owl diving at him. He held his arm out just in time.

“What’s this?” Harry asked, taking two notes from Hedwig’s beak. She only hooted at him, then flew off again. Harry tucked the notes away just as Astrid rounded the castle on her broom. She landed next to him, and Harry resigned himself to an hour of flying.

Several hours later, when Harry could no longer feel his legs, Astrid finally called it a day. She had made him throw quaffles at her, and as the time dragged on Harry had got much more willing to pelt his friend.

“You’d make a decent chaser,” she said as they walked back. “With you, Phoebe, and Jasmine, we’d have a whole team.”

“You want them to be beaters?” Harry asked. “Have you *seen* Phoebe’s aim?”

“It’s always the quiet ones,” Astrid said nonsensically. “I’ll never forget that day. Flitwick sticking out of the ceiling. Beautiful.”

Once in the castle, Harry told Astrid he wanted to go to the library. She gave him a knowing look before sauntering off to do something Harry hoped wouldn’t involve him.

He found an empty classroom and pulled out the notes from his brother.

One was a thank you note for the pictures, written for whoever had sent them. The other was a request for Harry to meet Monty later that evening. He had found something he thought Harry might want to see.

To say Harry was surprised to see Monty appear out of thin air was an understatement.

“Is that an invisibility cloak?” he asked, looking at the silvery fabric. It moved like water, and had an eerie feel to it. His skin pricked, and Harry pulled away.

“It was my dad’s,” Monty said happily, stuffing the cloak away.

Harry stopped himself from responding. James Potter has been dead for ten years, but the invisibility cloak looked brand new. Harry couldn’t imagine anyone spending so much on an eleven-year-old. Perhaps it had been unusually well-preserved.

“I’m glad it made its way back to you,” Harry said. “What is it you wanted me to see?”

“In here,” Monty said, opening the door to an unused classroom. All the chairs and desks had been stacked against the walls as if cleared for dueling. In the center of the room was an enchanted mirror.

Harry stopped himself from looking into it. He could feel the mirror wanted him to. To trap him, possibly.

“I was going to show Ron first,” Monty said, looking a bit shy. “But I reckon, if it just shows you your parents, he’s still got his. And you’ve helped us out a few times. So.”

“You’ve looked into it before?” Harry asked, approaching the mirror from the side. He read the inscription. “*I show not your face but your heart’s desire.* Nice warning.”

“Warning?” Monty asked.

“You saw your parents in this, Potter?” Harry asked.

Monty nodded. “Not just them, my entire family.”

Harry experienced a moment of panic and reached for a Calming Draught. But Monty hadn't mentioned seeing him in the mirror. He took a deep breath, but closed his fingers around a vial just in case.

“How does the mirror know what your family looks like?” Harry asked, still not looking in it. “That's strange, isn't it?”

Monty frowned. “I suppose. That's a good point. I didn't even know what my mum and dad looked like until recently. Why would a mirror know?”

“It's an enchanted mirror,” Harry said. “It shows you your heart's desire, and I don't think out of the goodness of its *own* heart. Someone made this mirror for a reason. You really want to look at it again, right?”

“Right,” Monty said slowly.

“That's part of the enchantment. It lures you in and makes you want to keep looking. Maybe forever. This is a dangerous magical artifact.”

“So you don't want to look at it?” Monty asked, dejected.

“No, I do,” Harry said quickly, feeling bad for hurting his brother's feelings. “This is very thoughtful, if not well thought out. There's a saying people tell their kids, it's to not trust anything if you can't see where it keeps its brain.”

Harry smiled at Monty, then stepped in front of the mirror.

It was as bad as he feared. He was older, so was Monty, and he could see the similarities in their faces. The shape of their eyes, their mouths. Harry looked more like his mum than he thought. Their mum was there, and James Potter, standing behind him and Monty and looking proud of both of them. Harry ignored that their mum was crying. Snape was there too for some reason, the worry lines smoothed away, a peaceful expression taking their place. His grandparents, too, and Harry tore his eyes away before he could see more. He didn't want to know what his heart desired. It was enough to know that it was nothing he could have.

“Did you see them?” Monty whispered.

Harry cleared his throat. “I saw my mum,” he said. “But she's gone, and a reflection can't replace her.”

“Wise words, Mr. Evans,” Albus Dumbledore said, stepping out of the shadows.

Harry nearly had a heart attack. “Jesus fucking christ,” he wheezed. He didn't care that the headmaster was watching, Harry downed the vial he held.

Dumbledore watched him placidly. “My apologies, dear boy. I didn't mean to startle you.”

“I’m sure,” Harry said blandly, the potion forcibly calming him. “What’s going on, headmaster? Why is this mirror in an unlocked room, uncovered, luring students to it?”

Dumbledore smiled at him like a dotty old man. “Excellent questions, Mr. Evans. Which is why the mirror will be moved to a more secure location. I shall ask you two to not seek it out again. Many have wasted away before the Mirror of Erised. I would hate to see such bright students fall under its thrall.”

“We won’t, sir,” Monty said.

“I would prefer to not waste away in front of a mirror,” Harry said. The next time he saw the mirror would *not* end well for the mirror. It was the third attempt on Monty’s life in as many months.

Harry briefly wondered if there was deeper magic at work, or perhaps that his brother was cursed to be drawn to mortal danger. Monty lacked self-preservation. It made him a brilliant seeker, but Harry feared for his own continued sanity.

They left Dumbledore with the mirror, doing who knew what with it. When they reached the staircase leading up to the seventh floor, Harry paused.

“Thank you for showing me the mirror, Potter, even if it wasn’t quite benign. It was nice to see my mum smiling.”

“Yeah,” Monty said wistfully. “You know, you’re pretty nice for a Slytherin.”

“I’m one of the good ones?” Harry asked, smirking.

“Yeah, exactly!” Monty said, smiling guilelessly.

Harry shook his head and started walking back to the dungeons where he belonged. “Good night, Potter.”

“Night, Evans.”

Swooping Evils

Chapter Summary

January/February 1992

“Speed, precision, finesse, strategy,” Charity recited, marching back and forth before their newest recruits. “Honing these skills, and more, will shape you into a master gobstones player.”

Harry looked at the fresh faces, who in turn watched Charity with awe. Though the Carrow twins were still holding out, Charity had managed to recruit Tracey Davis and Vincent Crabbe, two first-years with great potential. Their play styles were completely different. Tracey was a sniper, reading the field like a war general. Vince was something of an idiot savant, according to Charity. His strikes were powerful, and he overwhelmed his opponents with bloodthirst and brutality.

“That sounds like quidditch,” Vince said.

Harry sighed, and Tracey looked at him with alarm.

“I...it sounds like chess to me?” she said, voice quavering.

Charity stopped walking. “Quidditch,” she spat. “Chess! Any fool with a broom can play quidditch, any imbecile with chessmen can play chess. The pieces shout the best moves! We stoners don’t have that luxury.”

“Maybe choose another word to describe us,” Harry muttered.

“Never!” Charity said, eyes burning with passion. “Does a beater have better aim than a stoner? No! Can chess with all its rules and strict movements even *dream* to replicate the complexity of a gobstones field? No! Can a seeker move as gracefully as a bottle-washer arcing through the air, descending upon its enemies like a vengeful wraith, scattering their forces like so much chaff in the wind?”

“No?” Tracey offered.

“No!” Charity shouted. “Others may look down upon us, at the simplicity of gobstones. But therein lies the beauty, children. Modesty, elegance, *class*.”

“Modest?” Harry asked.

Charity seized him. “Evans is the future of this team. You two are diamonds in the rough, and you shall be honed in the heat of battle, polished,” she said, picking up a gobstone, “just as

the stones that give their lives for us. Tell me, children, are either of you interested in lapidary?"

Harry wondered how much Vince being on the team had to do with the fancy labradorite set he had. He exchanged a look with Killian, but the second-year was just as taken with Charity's enthusiasm as the first-years.

Realizing he was the only rational person in the room, Harry sighed in resignation and began setting up the initiation gauntlet.

Just before New Year, Snape took Harry to St. Mungo's to meet Andromeda Tonks. They took the floo from the fireplace in the hospital wing, so they didn't have to go through the *atrocious* visitor's entrance, as Snape put it.

"Do you know her at all?" Harry asked as they waited to speak with the receptionist.

"She was a fifth-year when I was sorted," Snape said. "Though we were in the same house, Healer Tonks and I had little occasion to speak."

"She was a Slytherin?" Harry asked, feeling a little better about his appointment. He knew houses didn't matter that much, even if people acted like they did, and *definitely* not once people left school. But apparently some biases had affected him too, because he was already inclined to trust Andromeda Tonks more.

"So was Madam Pomfrey," Snape said coolly, as if this wasn't world-shattering information. "Professor Sinistra, and Professor Vector as well."

"Interesting," Harry said faintly, moving forward with the queue. The woman in front of them had tentacles for arms and legs, and made sucking noises as she squelched forward. "Arithmancy is one of my favorite classes."

"Not Potions?" Snape asked, and Harry cringed a little.

"Potioneering is expensive," Harry said.

"True," Snape said. "It's not as though we have the privilege of an entire forest teeming with ingredients within easy reach. Or a thriving lacustrine environment."

Harry stopped himself from pointing out that students weren't allowed to go into the Forbidden Forest, or that far out onto the lake. The centaurs and merfolk were both very territorial, given how few places there were for them to live freely. But Snape hadn't said anything about being *allowed*, and Harry *had* gone into the forest before. He could probably make a nice profit too, selling plant and animal parts or making potions.

After checking in, Harry and Snape walked up to the second floor, Magical Bugs. Healers in lime green robes passed them with less urgency than the emergency department below. The second floor was for magical maladies, diseases like dragon pox and scrofungulus. Harry hoped whatever he had was curable, whether it was muggle or magical in nature. But there were some things that magic simply couldn't, or wouldn't, fix.

They stopped in front of a door with a nameplate reading *Tonks, Andromeda*. Snape knocked, and they were called in.

Harry paused for a moment, taking in the room. It was an office not unlike other doctors' offices. There were shelves packed with weighty medical tomes, comfortable armchairs, panels of dark wood, a rather simple desk. Behind it stood Andromeda Tonks, the focal point of the room.

She was a grand woman, with waves of soft brown hair and kind blue eyes so pale they were almost silver. Harry knew from looking her up that she was originally Andromeda Black, sister to Narcissa Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange. Unlike them, she had no connection to Voldemort's movement. She looked like Bellatrix, but was not obviously insane as her incarcerated older sister. It was hard to see the resemblance between her and Tonks, which made Harry suspect he had never seen Tonks' true face. If she even had one.

"It's been some time, Severus," she said, with a small smile. "And you must be Harry Evans. Please, come in. Have a seat."

Harry sat down on the edge of his seat. He wasn't entirely sure what to expect.

Andromeda didn't waste time on small talk. She had gone over Harry's medical records, sent to her by Madam Pomfrey with his permission. She made sure he was fine with Snape being there as well. He was. She explained how his type of intersexuality was often accompanied by more general endocrine system disorders, meaning the network of glands which produced various hormones for his body had issues. In particular, his adrenal glands and ovaries. Both were important to how his body functioned, though they could be removed in exchange for a lifetime of medication.

Since his adrenal glands were the ones most likely to kill him, that was what Andromeda wanted to focus on.

Andromeda took Harry into an examination room and had him lie flat on his stomach.

"I'll have to lift up your shirt a little to access your kidneys," she said.

Harry nodded and hid his face in his arms.

"Did you ever run into Nymphadora at Hogwarts?" Andromeda asked. Harry flinched her cold fingers gently felt around his lower back. He hated everything about this. "I suppose it was more likely *she* ran into *you*."

"She was the commentator at some quidditch matches," Harry said. "She made a lot of different faces. It was really funny. We also played against each other in gobstones."

“Ah, *you* were the boy she lost to,” Andromeda said brightly. “I ought to thank you for that. Her father and I were worried she would back out of auror training, even though it’s been her dream since she was little.”

Harry winced as his back was more insistently prodded. “How is she doing?”

“Very well,” Andromeda said. “She’s training under Alastor Moody.”

“Mad-Eye Moody?” Harry asked, surprised. “Didn’t he retire?”

Andromeda laughed. “One would hope. Apparently her being a metamorphmagus was too tempting.”

“Is that why you have experience with...with people like me? Because of Tonks?”

“It is. Nymphadora’s pubescence was an unending nightmare. It still *hasn’t* ended. She isn’t always my daughter, you know. Sometimes she’s my son, sometimes simply my child. Growing up as a metamorphmagus is very...dynamic. She’s proud of her ability, but it does come with its drawbacks. It’s extraordinarily rare, even in the Black family. There hadn’t been a metamorphmagus for several generations until we had Tonks. I suspect it’s due to her father being muggleborn. In an attempt to *purify* our line, we’d driven ourselves to near extinction.”

Harry’s back was starting to tingle uncomfortably, like when he didn’t drink enough water. It was also warm, as if Andromeda were kneading magic into him.

“Typically, when we regrow body parts it restores them to their normal function,” Andromeda said. “In a case like this, where the normal state is *dys*function, we have a few options. I’m finished, by the way.”

“Like what?” Harry asked, sitting up and tugging his shirt down.

Andromeda conjured a chair for herself and sat down. “Human transfiguration.”

Since his appointment with Andromeda, Harry had been feeling off. His kidneys had ached for days after, and he knew the transfiguration would ultimately revert as his body rejected the foreign magic, the change in its natural state. It wasn’t a permanent solution. Such a solution might not exist, Andromeda had been very clear about that.

Astrid had been a lot less clingy once she came to the conclusion that Harry had an ulterior motive for being in the library so often. Harry was more easily able to get some time to himself as the holiday neared its end. And he needed space. There were a lot of things he had to come to terms with.

He was in the *Daily Prophet* archive feeling at a loss, stuck in the late 40s. He didn't react when the door opened. He and Percy had agreed to take a break during the holiday. Harry suspected he was nearing his limit for useful muggle knowledge, and that soon Percy would no longer have any use for him.

"Evans," Percy said, "good to see you."

Harry didn't look up from the wedding announcement he was reading. Walburga Black and Orion Black. Fascinating. "Good morning, Weasley. Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year. My apologies for neglecting our studies this past week."

Harry looked up from the paper he had completely stopped reading and smiled. "It's fine, it's still the holiday."

"Indeed," Percy said. He was wearing the purple sweater Mrs. Weasley had knitted for him. Harry assumed the giant P was enough like a prefect's badge for Percy to tolerate it. Percy hadn't taken a seat yet, but was standing near the door and fiddling with the gold chain Harry sometimes saw him wearing.

"I sometimes lose track of..." Percy began. He didn't finish his sentence, instead saying, "I wanted to thank you, for your gift."

"Don't mention it," Harry said, hastily picking up another *Daily Prophet* to hide behind. "It's just common muggle sweets. I sent some to all of my friends."

"Friends, right," Percy said, coughing lightly. "Well, I didn't anticipate receiving anything from you, and it would be remiss of me not to reciprocate."

Harry peeked at Percy again, and saw he was now holding a small package.

"It took a few days for my parents to find it," Percy said, moving closer to Harry. "They were in Romania, visiting my brother Charles."

Harry took the package.

"You didn't have to get me anything," Harry said. "Should I open it now?"

Percy nodded stiffly.

Harry carefully unwrapped the gift, and soon he held in his hands a book titled *Hairy Snout, Human Heart*. An anatomically correct heart beat steadily on the cover. The publisher was Whizz Hard Books, perhaps the most unfortunate pun in history.

"It was quite popular a few years ago," Percy said, looking over Harry's head. Strangely, Percy being nervous made Harry less so. "If Professor Quirrell continues following the curriculum, you'll be discussing werewolves and other nocturnal *beasts*, as they are so designated by the Ministry, in a few weeks. Accounts from those with lived experience are invaluable for such endeavors."

“They are,” Harry readily agreed, smiling up at him. “Thanks, Percy.”

Percy sniffed and pushed up his glasses. “You are quite welcome.”

He had successfully convinced Charity that gobstones training five days a week was giving diminishing returns. If he sprained his wrist training too much, what were their prospects for the Gobstones Cup? So his captain toned it down, which gave Harry more time to spend with his friends, getting them to teach him random words in different languages. Adrian mostly taught him how to swear in Russian, but it helped Harry understand the shape of the words, the cadence of the language.

Snow was still on the ground in late January, a blank canvas over which the Slytherin and Ravenclaw game played out. Madam Hooch was refereeing again, despite her abject failure to protect the lives of the players during the season’s first game.

Penelope Clearwater, the bane of Harry’s existence, was the commentator. She was quite good at it—which made it worse in Harry’s opinion—and was obviously passionate about quidditch. It came through as she narrated the plays in her lovely voice. She didn’t even have the decency to disparage any of the Slytherin team, praising their plays as often as she did Ravenclaw’s.

Jasmine had charmed his hair green for the occasion. It was something she had picked up from Charms club that week, as those sorts of cosmetic charms were above OWL level. Harry didn’t know why Jasmine had chosen him as her model, but he didn’t *dislike* how it looked, even though it made him seem more invested in the game than he actually was.

“Keeper Urquhart blocks another goal,” Penelope said, perfectly emulating a news reporter. “Has Seeker Chang seen the snitch? Alas, no, she tricked us all with that feint! Chaser Flint gets another foul for cobbing, but he got in a rather good hit, I think. Chaser Davies is new on the team this year, this is his first broken nose of the season. And, yes, there’s the timeout. An excellent call from Captain Hillard. Well done, Robbie.”

Harry watched as the teams landed. Astrid shook her tiny fist at Marcus. The only points Ravenclaw was scoring were from foul shots.

It had been a long game. Slytherin was up three hundred points. They’d win no matter who caught the snitch, and yet the game continued. Thankfully, as soon as the game was back on, Terence shot off, outstripping the Ravenclaw seeker and securing the snitch.

“There’ll have to be a miracle for Gryffindor to win the cup,” Adrian said once he had stopped his traditional victory shouting.

“Don’t jinx it,” Harry said absently, looking at the dejected faces in the Gryffindor stands. He wanted to support his brother, but there were a lot of Slytherins invested in maintaining their

streak of championship wins. Harry now knew quidditch was much more than a game to Astrid, and a win would be especially meaningful to her.

He looked to the professors' stand, and saw McGonagall clapping. Harry wished he could help Astrid but he didn't know how. Somehow, he didn't think her being good at quidditch would work.

In February, the ice over the Black Lake began to crack and rain washed away the last of the snow. The little thestral Harry had got out of a cracker often laid down next to the window in Harry's dorm room, which showed the churning, murky depths of the lake.

It was an interesting little figurine, remarkably lifelike and possessing many of the same qualities as a real thestral. The thestral went through the motions of life. Sleeping, eating little bits of raw meat, flying around. Sometimes it was hard for Harry to remember it was an enchanted object.

Magical models were often like that. Harry had seen them in shop windows in Diagon Alley. They were terribly expensive, and not something Harry had ever expected to have. It was just a toy, something frivolous.

He adored his tiny thestral.

Unlike the bright yellow fish circling him, most people couldn't see the thestral, so sometimes Harry would bring it with him to the library.

One evening he had done just that while his friends were preoccupied with their various extracurriculars. Harry was looking into a spell that would make Frankie's visibility conditional. He didn't want to spell her totally invisible, she always got twitchy when Snape did that and it made communication garbled, but Harry thought it would be useful for people *not* to know he understood them no matter their language. And it didn't seem like Frankie was going to swim off any time soon.

Harry wasn't making much progress, though. Conditional charms were an advanced subject, and he was unsure where to begin. He suspected the books he needed were in the Restricted Section, with the rest of the good stuff. There wasn't exactly a card catalog he could check, and Madam Pince was rarely forthcoming when she deemed a topic inappropriate for a given student.

Harry despondently reshelfed the books and decided to stop by the kitchen before returning to his dormitory. However, just outside of the library, he came across a scene.

"I've been looking for someone to practice this on," Draco said, grinning evilly at Neville. Draco had his wand pointed at the other boy. Neville stood stock-still, his eyes wide in fear. "*Locomotor*—"

“Expelliarmus,” Harry snapped. Draco’s wand was ripped from his hand, and Harry snatched it out of the air.

Draco spun towards him. “Give that back!”

“Magic in the corridors *and* attacking another student,” Harry mused, looking over Draco’s wand. “Hawthorn? You should be more careful with it, or it might turn in your hand.”

“Give it back,” Draco growled, stepping towards Harry.

Harry handed the wand over, and Draco hastily grabbed it. “This is none of your business, Evans. Stay out of it.”

“Stay out of what?” someone behind Harry asked.

It was Percy. Harry looked over his shoulder and was beginning to smile, but then he saw who Percy was with.

“Why are you all blocking the door to the library?” Penelope asked. “And why are your wands drawn?”

Draco paled. Without Vince and Greg around, he was much less confident. “No reason, I was...we were...”

“Malfoy tried to curse me,” Neville said in a small voice. “Evans disarmed him before he could.”

Percy looked at Harry. “Is that true?”

“It is,” Harry said. “The Leg-locker Curse, I believe.”

“I see,” Percy said. “Malfoy, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“Mind your own business, Weasley,” Draco sneered.

“This *is* my business, Malfoy,” Percy said. “Detention for you, I think. With Professor McGonagall.”

Draco’s jaw dropped, disbelieving. “But I didn’t even do magic! Evans stopped me. He’s the one casting spells!”

“Which is why he’s getting detention with Professor Flitwick,” Percy said. “It’s nearly curfew, so off to bed, all of you. Longbottom, with me.”

Percy walked off without another word, Penelope at his side.

Neville had a pained expression. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get you in trouble, Evans."

"Don't worry about it," Harry said. "I've never got detention before. I was about due."

This made Neville even more upset.

"Longbottom!" Percy called from down the hall. "Don't dawdle!"

Neville jumped, then scurried down the corridor, disappearing with Percy around a corner. Harry was grimly pleased that Penelope went down another, to Ravenclaw Tower.

Since they were both in Slytherin, Harry and Draco ended up walking to the dungeons together.

"This is your fault," Draco said bitterly. "Longbottom's too much of a coward to tell on anyone."

"Are you proud of picking on the weak?" Harry asked. "Though I think you're misjudging Longbottom. Both of his parents were aurors, you know."

"Wouldn't know it from looking at him," Draco muttered.

Harry didn't like Draco. He didn't think many people did. Draco was loud, pretentious, had no filter, and had made Monty a personal victim of his. Harry suspected Draco had been sorted Slytherin simply because no other house would have tolerated him.

The Malfoy name only carried weight in certain circles, and while that unfortunately included the Minister, the Hogwarts Board of Governors, and a sizable portion of the Wizengamot, not everyone was intimidated by Lucius Malfoy. Draco spent his father's name rather freely, without regard for who it actually worked on or how childish he sounded. Harry supposed he couldn't blame Draco for the latter. He *was* a child.

Perhaps it would have been *Slytherin* of Harry to give Draco some advice on discretion. But he didn't want to give the kid any ideas, and he thought Draco was the kind of person who had to learn things the hard way.

Harry watched, gobsmacked, as Ron punched Draco in the face. Draco went down, hard. Neville had tackled both Vince and Greg and was flailing at them. It was the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff game, and everyone was tense. Harry hadn't thought *that* tense.

He was torn away from the insane fight happening in the Gryffindor stands by Astrid screaming and shaking him violently. "The snitch! The snitch!"

She was right. Monty was laying flat on his broom, speeding towards the referee, Professor Snape. Harry had been worried about something else deadly happening during Monty's second game, but he trusted Snape to not let his brother die. The headmaster was in the stands too, as if whoever had jinxed Monty's broom was only a threat during a game.

Monty nearly clipped Snape as he flew past. It was clear Snape wasn't that comfortable flying, and given the number of erroneous calls he had made in the first five minutes of the game, Harry wondered if he even knew the rules to quidditch. There were hundreds of them.

Then again, Snape hadn't been subtle about his contempt for everything Gryffindor this year. Giving Hufflepuff free shots aligned with that.

Harry held his breath as Monty dove, pulling up just in time, his toes skimming the grass. Monty rose back into the air, the snitch held over his head. The Hufflepuff team couldn't believe it. The Gryffindor team couldn't believe it. No one could believe it. The crowd held its breath, then collectively rose in a maddening din.

"I told you, he's a prodigy," Astrid said faintly, sitting down with a *thump*. "That's a school record."

"Potter's good," Harry said neutrally, watching as the headmaster whispered something to Monty and Snape spat at the ground. "But so is Terence. He's got more experience."

Astrid laughed harshly. "Diggory's been flying since he could say *broom*. He didn't even *react* when Potter spotted the snitch. He just sat on his Air Wave like a lump."

"No one did," Cassius pointed out. "This early in the game I thought it was a feint. Seekers only have a split second to make the decision."

"And he made the wrong call," Astrid said bluntly. "This isn't good for us. Diggory's no slouch. He dropped the ball today, but Hufflepuff's last chance is their game with us."

"So is ours," Cassius said. "We're at a disadvantage. Gryffindor's already won two of their three games. Their last is with Ravenclaw. They beat us, so they can beat Ravenclaw."

"But it matters by how much," Astrid said, "which is why I'm saying we—"

"And they'll have the advantage of knowing how *our* last game goes."

"Don't talk over me!"

Harry sighed, sharing commiserating looks with Phoebe and Jasmine as Adrian joined the argument, then Terence as they trudged back to the castle. Harry was a little worried how far they might go for Slytherin to win the Quidditch Cup. It wasn't uncommon for players to end up mysteriously injured before an important match.

Harry came to an abrupt stop.

"I've just remembered, I need to ask Professor Snape something," he said, turning around and hurrying back to the pitch.

"Wait, Harry, we'll—" Phoebe started.

He waved without looking. "It's about potions. I'll see you in the common room."

After a brisk walk, the stadium came into sight. He passed by the changing room assigned to Hufflepuff first, set at the nearer end of the pitch. Cedric Diggory was there alone, out of his uniform and carrying his broom.

Harry didn't know Cedric that well. Slytherins rarely shared classes with Hufflepuffs, and Cedric was in neither Arithmancy nor Ancient Runes. Harry knew *of* him, it was impossible not to. Before Monty had begun at Hogwarts, Cedric was arguably the most popular student, at least under fifth year.

"Good game," Harry said politely as he passed by.

Cedric laughed humorlessly. "More like a *short* game. I didn't exactly play, did I? I hope our game against Slytherin goes better..."

Cedric blinked, focusing on Harry. "Oh, Evans. I, uh..."

Harry held up a hand, forestalling Cedric. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll give Terence a run for his money."

"You haven't even seen me play," Cedric said, smiling.

"Who's fault is that?" Harry asked.

"Potter's?"

He snorted. "That's fair. I've got to catch Professor Snape, but it was nice talking to you."

"Likewise," Cedric said, still smiling.

Harry shook his head and hurried around the pitch. He was just in time to see Monty out of uniform and climbing on top of his Nimbus, presumably to fly a final victory lap.

"Potter!" Harry called out, drawing Monty's attention.

Monty paused just as he was about to take off. "Evans? What is it?"

He was worried to have found Monty alone, without the rest of his team. Why hadn't they dragged him off to celebrate? Still, he was glad to see no one suspicious lurking around.

"Have you seen Professor Snape? I wanted to ask him a question."

Monty seemed to be debating something, so Harry waited patiently. He didn't really care about finding Snape, it was just a convenient excuse to check on his brother.

"I did," Monty finally said. "I've just seen him go into the forest in a hurry."

Harry reevaluated the situation. "You were going to follow him?"

"I know he's your head of house," Monty said, "but it's suspicious!"

Harry slowly approached his brother. "Is it?" he asked. "Professor Snape gathers potions ingredients from the forest. It's part of his job."

Harry wasn't entirely sure the last part was true, but it sounded good.

“Really?” Monty asked, deflating. “That does make sense. But why was he hurrying?”

“Who knows,” Harry said lightly. “Could be a plant that only blooms at a certain time of the day, or year, or he could have seen a rare creature. Either way, you shouldn’t go haring off into the forest. There are creatures in there that can fly, you know. Thestrals, hippogriffs, vampire bats with actual vampirism, wyverns, doxies, swooping evils. Those’ll eat your brain.”

Monty gaped at him. “I’ve never even heard of those!”

“Why do you think the forest is off-limits to students?” Harry asked, giving in to his urge to ruffle Monty’s perpetually messy hair. “Come on. Let’s put your broom away, and I’ll tell you what I know about swooping evils. By the way,” he added, smiling at his brother. “Great game.”

Pretty Boy

Chapter Summary

March 1992

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

People were still talking about the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff game a week later.

“It’s legendary now,” Astrid moaned as they walked to Hogsmeade. Thankfully, it hadn’t rained in a few days and the grounds weren’t quite as muddy. Someone had done a patchy transfiguration job on parts of the road, replacing the cracked mud with uneven yellow bricks. Hogsmeade-bound students made a game hopping from brick to brick. Harry wasn’t going to put that to the test.

“Only because it was Potter playing,” Adrian said, stomping a loose brick down. “It was an easy catch, nothing to write home about.”

“I bet *loads* of people have written home,” Jasmine said. She’d got a parasol from somewhere and was spinning it around while Phoebe tried to do some kind of duplication charm on it, littering their path with bits of lace.

“I did,” Astrid admitted. “Legendary!”

“Just because everyone else is talking about it doesn’t mean *we* have to,” Cassius said.

“Exactly, *thank you*,” Terence said. “Let’s focus on the future. I’ve worked out how many points we need to win by…”

“Not this again,” Phoebe groaned, giving up her charm. “The next match is *weeks* away. You’re all overthinking it. Harry isn’t like this with gobstones.”

“Don’t drag me into this,” he said.

“You don’t *have* to listen,” Astrid said tartly. “And the gobstones tournament isn’t until May!”

“We’ve still got qualifying rounds,” Harry said. “But, yeah, the whole school isn’t turning out for us.”

“But *we* will, Harry,” Phoebe said, looping her arm through his. Harry let himself be towed along. “We’re almost at the village. Where to first?”

“Spintwitches,” four voices called out.

Phoebe rolled her eyes. “*Fine*. We’ll look at gobstones, a true athlete’s sport. Right, Harry?”

“Our team is a bit bloodthirsty to reduce it to a sport,” Harry said. “It’s a battle of wits—”

“With Crabbe on the team?” Terence muttered.

“—of attrition. We don’t play a mere game. We wage war. Sun Tzu said—”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” Phoebe said, tugging a flyaway strand of his hair. “You’re so lucky. I bet you don’t use any product. You should grow it out, it would be *so* pretty. Like a waterfall...of, um, night.”

“I like it short,” Harry said, ignoring how confused a word like *pretty* made him feel. “I’ve seen how long it takes you and Jasmine to get ready. Astrid knows what I’m talking about.”

“What?” Astrid said, letting go of Adrian’s collar. “Yeah, short hair. The helmet fits better.”

“See?” Harry said. “The helmet fits better.”

Phoebe rolled her eyes again. “If you say so, Harry. Is *Harry* your actual given name? I’ve always wondered.”

“It’s what I’ve always been called,” he said honestly.

“Bit common, though,” she said.

“Sorry, should I have been named Hadrianus? Would that have met your exacting standards?”

“Yes,” Phoebe said, throwing open the door to Spintwitches Sporting Needs and marching him in.

The others filed in as well, the four quidditch players making a beeline for the broom counter, where a harried employee was already dealing with what looked like most of the Hufflepuff team.

“Ever since you sent me that muggle sweet for Chrimbo,” Jasmine said at his side, “I’ve been dying to play a game of skittles. Think they’ve got that here?”

“I bet they’ve got a lawn version,” Phoebe said, releasing Harry to cling onto Jasmine instead. “Let’s go look!”

Harry shook his head and went deeper into the store. He *did* want to look at gobstones sets. He couldn’t rely on Christmas crackers forever.

There were standards for the professional sets. Size, weight, material, stone grade, luminosity, hardness, and so on. Amateur and casual games were much more forgiving.

The selection at Spintwishes left something to be desired. Given it was a general sports store in a Hogwarts-adjacent village, it made sense. The business needed to appeal to a variety of customers, and Hogsmeade likely couldn't support a store that overspecialized. They catered to the students and the locals. Everyone else went to Diagon Alley if they needed a broom tuned or their gobstones polished.

What they did offer was at the high end of Harry's budget. Moss agate, crystal quartz, amazonite, dalmatian jasper. Relatively common stones, but still nice to look at. The rose quartz was the prettiest, but Harry rather liked the tri-colored fluorite. He picked a fluorite gobstone up, weighing it in his hand. His gold rutilated quartz gobstones were of better quality, and would last him for some time yet. Harry *did* want an extra set, but he could do without. He could ask Phoebe about that duplication charm, or maybe someone would leave a set behind at the end of the year.

"Want to upgrade?"

Harry looked up and saw Cedric Diggory at the end of the aisle, smiling at him.

"Not quite," Harry said, setting the fluorite back down. "This wouldn't cut it in league games. I doubt Charity would let me play with them."

"Charity Lament? Team captain, right?" Cedric asked, walking towards him. "Tonks had black hair for a week after she lost to you."

Harry wasn't sure what to say about that. "Sorry?"

"Did you win by accident?" Cedric teased, tossing his head. His hair fell artfully around his face. Harry wondered if it was a spell.

Part of Cedric's popularity had to do with his good looks. Wavy dark hair, pretty eyes, rosy cheeks that dimpled when he smiled, the smile itself blinding. Even at fourteen, when words like *handsome* were often omitted from their lexicons. It was a little overwhelming up close.

"Maybe," Harry said. "It's hard to know where the stones will fall."

Cedric was standing next to him now, and Harry had to look up to meet his eyes. They were a startling shade of grey. "Is that some kind of gobstones saying?"

"*Let the chips fall where they may*," Harry said. "It's more of a muggle saying,"

"Do muggles throw chips?" Cedric asked, confused. Somehow even *that* expression looked good on him.

"Different kind of chips," Harry said. "Wood chips. You can't predict where they'll land."

"Uh, sure," Cedric said, not sounding sure at all. "What do muggles use wood chips for? I'm in Muggle Studies, we've never talked about it."

"You're going on about muggles again, Harry?" Adrian asked, popping his head around a shelf. "You've got any questions about muggles, Diggory, best ask our Harry. We do. He's

like a birdwatcher, that one. Knows all their habits and shi—such.”

Adrian frowned, and Harry thought he heard someone whispering to him.

“What am I doing?” Adrian asked. “It’s obvious, isn’t it? I’m—”

Adrian disappeared, and Astrid took his place.

“Sorry about him,” Astrid said, grinning innocently. “Bit of an odd duck. Carry on.”

Harry looked at the spot Astrid had vanished from, wondering what his friends were thinking.

“Sorry, right, wood chips,” he said, looking back at Cedric, who for some reason was blushing. “It’s from when they cut wood. With axes, and saws. They don’t have magic, so they’ve got to do it with different tools.”

“Our teacher calls them adaptations,” Cedric said, leaning against a shelf. It looked really uncomfortable.

“That makes it sound like they’re crippled without magic,” Harry said. “They really aren’t.”

Cedric cleared his throat. “I’m surprised you know so much about muggles.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Why’s that? Because I’m a Slytherin?”

Cedric’s face got redder. “Sounds a bit stupid when you put it like that.”

“It’s not totally unfounded,” Harry said, smiling a little. “Wouldn’t it make more sense for us to know a lot about muggles? *Know thy enemy*, and all that.”

Cedric looked alarmed. “Enemy?”

“I was joking,” Harry said quickly. “It was a *joke*. I have muggle friends.”

“Alright,” Cedric said, relieved. “I thought for a moment...Friends with muggles, really? What’s that like?”

“Same as being friends with anyone else, I imagine,” Harry said, smiling again. “So, what brings you and the entire Hufflepuff team in here today?”

Harry wasn’t entirely sure how he ended up going around Hogsmeade with Cedric Diggory of all people.

Well, Cedric and a rotating cast of their respective friends. It was awkward, given the impending quidditch match. Almost everyone was rooting against Slytherin. The other three houses were united in *not* wanting them to continue their winning streak. So there was snubbing and arguing and storming off, only for the person to resurface later.

Harry tried not to pay too much attention to what was going on in the background. His friends kept giving him significant looks he couldn't interpret.

They went to Scrivenshaft's first, and the shop owner gawked at the number of students perusing her wares.

It was a stationery store, and while Harry knew they existed in the muggle world as well, he had never been to one. He was fine with a 50p spiral notebook from Poundland and a cheap biro. But magic school came with certain traditions, such as parchment and quills.

Feathers were neatly bundled everywhere. Goose, swan, eagle, pheasant. More exotic birds like peacocks and parrots. Cheaper options, like chicken feathers, in a variety of colors. There were rolls of parchment from just as many animals, sheep, cows, goats, though in glass cases the rolls of parchment had more obscure origins, stripped, spotted, and opalescent skins for vital documents. There was paper too, nice notebooks bound in leather, far too expensive to use for class notes.

Harry wandered towards the display of inks. Black, red, blue, green, with names like Onyx, Dragon's Blood, Viridian, Chartreuse. Ink that changed colors as you wrote, ink that glowed, invisible ink.

Harry watered down his ink. He was habitually parsimonious.

He noticed a feather that was half emerald green, half shadowy grey, from a mallard.

"Do you like that one?" Cedric asked from over his shoulder.

"It's nice," Harry said, dropping his voice to a whisper, "but I think I could find one at a pond."

Cedric had leaned in to listen, and Harry noticed he smelled like broomstick polish and cinnamon.

"I think this better suits you," Cedric said, holding up a feather. It was black with deep blue iridescence. "Magpie."

Harry swallowed nervously. "I could find one of those on the ground, too," he said, feeling like an idiot.

"You'll put quill shops out of business with that kind of thinking," Cedric said, grinning as if they shared in this conspiracy.

"It's only practical," Harry said, taking the magpie feather from Cedric. Their fingers brushed. Harry's mouth went dry. "Are you getting anything?"

“No,” Cedric said, “but it’s fun to have a look around. Want to visit Honeydukes?”

Honeydukes was much more exciting to visit without braces. Harry was a little shy to take his retainers out with Cedric watching, but the other boy had insisted Harry try a sample of Tantalizing Toffee. Cedric looked more curious than disturbed by the retainers, and didn’t ask Harry to explain what they were, which he appreciated. He also got to try Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum, feeling a little like he was going to turn into a blueberry at its intense flavor.

“Violet, you’re turning violet, Violet,” Harry said, smiling to himself.

“What’s that?” Cedric asked, a jelly slug crawling across his hand and leaving a vibrant trail of syrup.

“It’s from a muggle film,” Harry said, “based on a book.”

Harry found himself explaining the plot of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory to a captivated Cedric as they worked their way through Honeydukes’ samples. He had to turn down something with peanuts in it, claiming he simply didn’t like it. He didn’t want to start suffocating in the middle of Honeydukes, it would be far too embarrassing. He did discreetly stab himself with his allergy shot, just in case. It made him light headed and giddy.

As he explained to a perplexed Cedric that Charlie Bucket’s story was fictional, that Oompa-Loompas were not a type of house-elf—though Harry *was* curious where Roald Dahl had got the idea—and that Vermicious Knids *definitely* didn’t exist, he spotted a tall, red-headed figure walking past the window. It was Percy, his prefect’s badge shining ruby and gold in the spring sunlight. Penelope was there too, apparently on rounds with him.

When Percy noticed him, Harry began to raise his hand in greeting, but Percy quickly turned away to whisper something to Penelope, and they were soon out of sight.

“Shame you didn’t come with us for Valentine’s weekend,” Jasmine said, holding a box of discounted conversation hearts, which were speaking over each other. “There were all sorts of themed sweets. And you can eat more things now that your, uh, thing has changed?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, not caring to elaborate *why* he hadn’t wanted to visit Hogsmeade the previous month. “There’s always next year.”

Jasmine brightened. Since her braids had grown out, she had her hair in two space puffs Phoebe had charmed to sparkle. She was pretty as a doll, with her button nose and lively dark eyes, and when out of school robes she often wore frilly dresses with wide skirts in pastels that complimented her dark complexion. In short, she was adorable.

“Did *you* go to Hogsmeade last month?” she asked Cedric, smiling sweetly. Harry knew her well enough that he noticed the calculating look in her eyes.

“Yeah, with my mates,” Cedric said, his eyes flicking to Harry. “They’ve all run off now, but I promise I *do* have friends.”

“And not just sycophants?” Jasmine asked, her eyes wide and innocent.

“I, uh...”

“Isn’t it about lunch?” Harry said. “We could go to the Three Broomsticks before it gets too crowded.”

“Brilliant,” Cedric said quickly. “Yeah, let’s. I’ll just, uh, buy this,” he said, taking both his and Harry’s items and hurrying to the counter.

“What was that about?” Harry asked, turning to Jasmine.

“I was only curious,” she said, batting her eyes at him. “If Cedric was seeing someone, that is.”

“Seeing someone?” Harry asked. “Why? Do you like him?”

Jasmine looked at him like he was an idiot, shook her head, and walked away.

Percy’s strange dismissal of him bothered Harry for the next few days. On Wednesday evening, he had got up to 1953. He was a little concerned he wouldn’t find an answer before the end of the school year, but he would keep searching until he did.

Harry had thought about asking Percy if he had offended him somehow. Seeing Percy with Penelope that first time had been like being doused with cold water. It was less shocking every time, but reinforced how hopeless his silly little crush had been. Despite that, Harry thought they could at least be friends, at the *very* least friendly.

Maybe he was reading too much into it.

He was thus ill-prepared when Percy appeared in the doorway.

“Evans, good evening,” Percy said primly.

Harry nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak.

“OWLs are coming up, as I’m sure you know,” Percy continued, not stepping into the room.

Harry understood what Percy was trying to say. “I need more time to study for exams, too.”

“Excellent,” Percy said. “Glad we’re on the same page. I’ll leave you to it, then.”

Percy left the room, and the door clicked shut with finality. Harry stared at it for a while, anxiety making it hard to breathe. He couldn’t quite believe what had just happened.

Harry had faced his own boggart. He knew one of his greatest fears was his brother rejecting him. It wasn’t *just* Monty, though he was the most important person to Harry. It was rejection

by his housemates for being raised muggle or not knowing enough about the magical world, rejection by his peers for being too smart, too quiet, too strange. Rejection for being too much of a burden, not being enough, not being *right*. Not being who someone wanted.

It was worse, Harry thought, when he didn't quite know the reason.

What had he done wrong?

"He seemed like he was in a rush to get away," Harry said quietly. To Frankie, perhaps, or the little thestral chomping on the corner of the paper he held.

Unless he chased Percy down and shook the truth out of him, there was little Harry thought he could do about this situation.

He went back to reading the *Daily Prophet*. At least that had some answers for him.

After becoming acquainted with Cedric Diggory, Harry started seeing him everywhere. Cedric would greet him while passing in the corridors, smile at him from across the Great Hall, run into him at the library. It took Harry an embarrassingly long time to understand what was going on.

"He likes you!" Phoebe said one evening, throwing her hands into the air. Someone had tripped into Harry earlier that day, knocking books and notes from his arms. Cedric happened to be nearby, and helped him pick everything up.

"He's just a nice person," Harry said dismissively. "He'd do that for anyone."

"Fine, but he was watching *you*. He was paying attention! I saw!"

Harry looked around the common room. Thankfully no one was paying much attention to him and his friends, as Charity was aggressively drilling their younger teammates in preparation for the first qualifying round. It was quite loud.

"Yeah, but *me*?" Harry asked. "Cedric Diggory?"

He was relieved that everyone was seemingly okay with boys dating each other. He knew people in the muggle world could get attacked for it, even killed.

"What's wrong with you?" Phoebe asked. "You're great!"

"But I'm not..." Harry struggled to find the words.

"You're cute!" she cried. "You've got that whole Byronic thing going for you."

"Cute?"

“Cute,” Phoebe insisted. “You’ve got a very distinctive look.”

“What she said,” Adrian said, dropping into the seat next to Harry. “Dark, broody, mysterious. Birds fall over themselves for that. And blokes too, apparently.”

Phoebe gave him a withering look.

“I’ve never brooded in my life,” Harry said.

“Bullshit,” Adrian replied.

“Your hair is gorgeous,” Phoebe gushed, leaning towards him. Harry tried to back away, but he was trapped in his seat. “I would *kill* to have your eyelashes. I would literally perform a ritual sacrifice.”

“Right,” Harry said, unnerved.

He’d never given much thought to his own appearance. He knew his mum had been a beautiful woman, and that if you squinted, or unfocused your eyes, he could pass for her son. And while Eileen Prince wasn’t a classic beauty, she did have a *distinctive* look, as Phoebe had put it. But that someone was attracted to him, someone like Cedric “Pretty Boy” Diggory, was baffling. There was no precedent for it.

“Are you sure about that?” Harry asked. “Cedric Diggory? Really?”

“Yes,” Phoebe said, staring at him intently.

“Well,” Harry said, relaxing a little. He didn’t really believe it, but if it was true... “I suppose this changes things.”

Chapter End Notes

I've updated the tags, I hope it isn't confusing

:)

Spring Days

Chapter Summary

March/April 1992

Nothing changed much, not immediately.

Hostilities between Slytherin and Hufflepuff reached a fever pitch as the match neared. Astrid made veiled comments about fraternizing with the enemy, but confided that she was glad Harry was *getting over the Weasley*. She had a special place in her hateful little heart for all things Gryffindor. Phoebe and Jasmine had concocted a star-crossed lovers narrative which barely made any sense. Cedric was the Hufflepuff team's up-and-coming seeker. Harry played gobstones. There wasn't much overlap. The boys in his dorm had various opinions. Cassius didn't really care, Terence was distantly supportive, and Adrian was oddly proud that Harry had *landed* Cedric.

"I don't even know if I like him back," Harry said, but his protestations fell on deaf ears.

He wasn't sure what dating was like, or what being a boyfriend meant. Studying together? He already did that as Cedric kept showing up in the library. Going on dates? They'd been to Hogsmeade, did that count? Holding hands? *Kissing*?

Harry was vaguely terrified about anything more than that. He was intensely private about his body, and afraid of being touched by people. What if they found out? Should he tell them? Did he *have* to? Could he trust them?

Cedric was nice, almost to a fault, but Harry didn't know him that well. So maybe that was the first part. Getting to know someone.

He knew his crush on Percy had been, in the beginning, fairly superficial. Harry hadn't even understood at first what he was feeling, it was all so new. An attractive, older boy he spent a lot of time with? Not to mention smart, witty, diligent. The more Harry got to know Percy, the more he genuinely liked him.

With Cedric, part of the appeal was that he already liked Harry, according to Harry's friends. It did explain why Cedric looked at him so frequently, and went out of his way to interact with him. There were some awkward moments, like if Harry made an off-color joke he had to explain, or when he wanted to make a somewhat mean remark but held back.

Cedric never had a bad word to say about anyone. He smiled a lot, and would laugh like Harry had just said the funniest thing in the world. Cedric was kind too, offering to help younger students study, staying back to help professors clean up, giving everyone a little of

his time. He even spoke up when someone was being bullied, when so many others would walk by.

At least, these were the impressions Harry got.

Leading up to the match, both teams were training hard. Harry got to chat with Cedric a few times over those weeks, but he mostly saw him at meals or busy doing homework at the library.

“Honestly, I can’t wait until the match is over,” Cedric confided to him as Madam Pince began driving people out of the library one evening. “The gobstones qualifying games are tonight, right?”

“It is,” Harry said. “It decides the team composition for the finals.”

Since the corridors leading to their common rooms both began in the entrance hall, Harry and Cedric were walking together from the library. Cedric was so close his robes kept brushing against Harry’s.

“Will you come see me before the match tomorrow?” Cedric suddenly asked. “I know you’ll be rooting for Slytherin, but...I...”

Harry ducked his head down to hide his smile. “Yeah, I can do that.”

The Great Hall was eerily silent the morning of the match. Everyone knew what was at stake. Both Slytherin and Hufflepuff had a loss and a win, though the five minute game with Gryffindor had left Hufflepuff with significantly fewer overall points. For them it was the difference between second and third place. For Slytherin, it was their last chance at the cup. They needed a landslide victory.

Harry had pulled Cedric aside as he was entering the Great Hall for breakfast to wish him good luck. Cedric’s grateful smile was dazzling. Unfortunately, this hadn’t gone unobserved by his friends.

“He’s corrupted you,” Astrid said, shaking her head.

Harry glanced at Terence, who had the look of a man walking to the gallows. “Good luck.”

Terence jerked, then turned to face Harry. “Luck?” he said. “I don’t need luck. I have skill.”

“So dramatic,” Phoebe said, laying a hand over her brow. She had swooned into Jasmine’s arms at seeing Cedric thank Harry.

Harry noticed Monty and his friends coming down the grand staircase. Gryffindors were often the last to show up for meals, which confused Harry as he had seen how much Ron

Weasley could pack away. There were some members of the Gryffindor quidditch team too, namely the Weasley twins.

“Well, well, well,” one of them said. Harry was fairly sure it was George, as he tended to speak first. “You know, Freddie, I always said snakes aren’t meant to fly. They haven’t even got legs!”

Fred’s grin matched his brother’s. “You’re absolutely right, Georgie. They should stay in the dirt where they belong.”

Harry knew the twins were just talking shite, but not everyone had the privilege of being in class with them for three years.

“You’d know all about dirt, wouldn’t you, Weasley?”

Harry suppressed a sigh as Draco Malfoy came into view with his two shadows. Vincent looked uncomfortable once he spotted Harry, and made the executive decision to drag Greg into the Great Hall.

Harry didn’t know Vince that well. He was quiet, and despite, or perhaps because of, his size preferred to stay in the background. He opened up more while playing gobstones, but someone like Draco easily overshadowed him.

“Shut it, Malfoy,” Ron snapped, stepping forward. The twins seized him before he could start another brawl with Draco, carrying him off to the Great Hall, Monty and Hermione following behind.

Monty paused, though, looking at Harry then Harry’s friends. “Um, Wood says you’ve got a really good team.”

Then he hurried away.

“That was interesting,” Cassius said after a moment.

“Who gives a bloody *fuck* what Wood thinks?” Astrid growled.

“You know,” Phoebe said thoughtfully, “there *are* some snakes that can fly. Occamies, for instance.”

You could hear a pin drop.

“Dear heart,” Jasmine said soothingly, “I don’t think he meant it literally.”

“I’m *starving*,” Adrian said. “Are we going in or what?”

“All I’m saying is that the Rampant Occamies would be the best, nay, the *only* name for our team!”

“Pheeb does bring up a good point,” Jasmine said. “Why *don’t* the house teams have names?”

“Who cares,” Adrian said, eyes never leaving the game. “Did you see that hit by Bole?”

“Yes, and all the other ones too,” Jasmine said, returning to her tatting. She wasn’t the only one who had picked up something to do while they waited for the game to end. Cassius had started reading two hours in. Millicent Bulstrode had fully gone to sleep.

The game had been going on for hours. They had all missed lunch, and the time for dinner was nearing.

“They can barely fly anymore,” Harry said, watching as two of the Hufflepuff chasers crashed into each other while trying to score. Astrid grabbed the quaffle out of the air and threw it at Marcus, who barely caught it.

“This is just sad,” Jasmine said, not looking up. Harry saw she was making a lace serpent out of green thread. He wondered what it was for, though suspected it was for another dress.

“There it is!” Adrian shouted, jumping up. “Diggory’s spotted the snitch!”

All of Slytherin watched in stunned silence as Terence flew headfirst at Cedric, on a collision course, while everyone else was shouting their support.

“He’s mad,” Phoebe said. “They’ll kill each other!”

“Only if Diggory doesn’t pull up,” Adrian said with a feral grin. “Terence isn’t a chicken.”

Harry held his breath as he watched Cedric swerve away at the last moment, while Terence dropped down and grabbed the snitch, rising back into the air as the game was called.

It wasn’t the victory they needed, though. Hufflepuff had been up in points after a bludger had broken Astrid’s arm and part of her broom. It was bad luck, all around.

“Let’s go down to congratulate them,” Cassius suggested, snapping his book shut. “I doubt Astrid’s happy about this.”

“No,” Harry said, watching as Terence was hoisted into the air with the snitch. Astrid was smiling, but it didn’t look right. “There’s always next year.”

Hairy Snout, Human Heart by Anonymous was a much better read than *My Life as a Werewolf* by Daisy Hookum. That author’s gimmick was to live as the subject of her research

for a year and write about her experience. She went to rather extreme lengths to do so, even registering with the Ministry and simulating what the werewolf transformation and madness were like on full moons. But, when the year was over, she could go back to her regular life, free of obstacles and consequences. A real werewolf didn't have that luxury.

Harry had put off reading it for when Quirrell got to nocturnal beasts, which turned out to be the week before Easter break. He apparently needed the two weeks to recover from discussing such a debilitating topic. Harry wished he had read the book Percy gave him sooner, as he really resonated with it. Struggling with an illness, betrayed by one's own body, discriminated against. Harry didn't have to go through it *every* month, there was at least that.

But he was done reading it now, and would have to find another book to occupy him during Quirrell's lectures. Harry put the novel into his bag, then got up to look around the library for something else. Out of curiosity, he wandered into the Muggle Studies section. None of the books were written by muggles, which Harry thought was sad and ironic. From what he could tell, most magical authors who wrote on muggles fancied themselves scholars, as muggle anthropologists. The amount of misinformation Harry regularly heard, which frustrated muggleborns went out of their way to correct, told Harry that none of them had ever really spoken to a muggle.

One title caught his eye. *Easy Spells to Fool Muggles*. An innocuous title, though Harry felt there was something sinister about it. Fooling muggles? How different was that from muggle baiting, really? Still, he suspected it would have some useful spells, so Harry picked it up and paged through the table of contents. He looked up when he heard someone walking towards him.

"What are you reading?" Cedric asked, looking over his shoulder.

Harry showed him the cover. "I wonder what the harder spells are."

"I'm not sure," Cedric said, leaning against a shelf. A few books fell off, and Cedric hastily picked them up. "Er, I think that's an upper year book. Not like it's any use to us yet, since we can't do magic outside of school."

"Yeah," Harry said, amused by Cedric's clumsiness. It seemed to happen most often in Harry's vicinity.

"I, uh, should get back," Cedric said. "To my friends. We've got an essay due in Care before the holiday. I just saw you, and I, um, wanted to say hi."

"Hi," Harry said, watching Cedric expectantly.

"Hi," Cedric said quickly. "Um, bye!"

He hurried off, clipping another shelf as he turned a corner. Harry shook his head and walked back to his own seat.

The book was mostly about ways to trick or confuse muggles. Noises, lights, illusions, sort of like a stage magician. Very much like a stage magician. Harry knew such tactics were useful,

but he wasn't looking for party tricks. After writing down a few interesting spells, Harry shut the book and was about to look for another when someone cleared their throat.

"So," Percy said, sitting down across from Harry. "Cedric Diggory."

"What about him?" Harry asked. He hadn't spoken to Percy in weeks. Harry saw him in the library sometimes, or on patrol doing his rounds, and in the Great Hall, and the hospital wing while getting their respective shots.

It was a small castle.

It really wasn't, but it *felt* like it.

"I see you've become acquainted with Diggory," Percy said, pushing up his glasses. Harry followed the motion, frowning at the shadows under Percy's eyes. He looked incredibly tired. "You know, his father and mine work at the Ministry together. Amos Diggory, he's in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

"I know," Harry said. "Ced's told me. He's taking Care of Magical Creatures since he wants to work in the department too."

"Ced..." Percy nodded to himself. "Splendid. It's rare for third-years to think about their future careers, which is a shame since which courses you select are critical. They really ought to do career counseling in third year instead of fifth."

"Have you already done it?" Harry asked.

"Oh, no," Percy said. "Professor McGonagall doesn't start until after Easter holiday."

"You want to work for the Ministry, right?" Harry asked.

"Indeed," Percy said. He cleared his throat again. "The Diggorys are our neighbors. One of several wizarding families in Ottery St. Catchpole. Relatively new compared to the Weasleys. We've been established for centuries. Lovely neighbors, of course. Lovely family. Very well connected."

Harry listened, confused, as Percy continued to ramble about everything he knew regarding the Diggory family.

"What's that you're reading?" Percy suddenly said, picking up *Easy Spells to Fool Muggles*. "What are you reading this for?"

Harry thought about giving an excuse, and then decided to be honest. "It's for Frankie," he said, pointing at the babelfish.

Percy glanced at her, then looked back at Harry.

"I wanted to look up conditional charms," Harry explained. "So I could still see her even if others couldn't."

“Yes, I see,” Percy said, frowning at the book. “Your babelfish would be rather hard to explain to muggles. Well, this simply won’t do. The spells in here are rudimentary, far below your level. Just a moment.”

Percy got up, taking the book away with him. Harry sat at his table, mystified.

Percy returned a few minutes later, carrying several books. “This will be a good foundation,” he said, setting the books in front of Harry. “I have been rather busy lately, but as a prefect it is my duty to support fellow students. I’m more than happy to assist anyone in their pursuit of knowledge.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, peering into Percy’s face. “Are you alright?”

“Perfectly well, thank you,” Percy said. “Good day, Evans.”

“Good day,” Harry said, picking up the books. “Wait, Percy, these are from...”

He looked up, but Percy was already gone.

“...the Restricted Section.”

With Easter holiday came a deluge of homework. Cassius had put together study schedules for all of them, which was nice if a little controlling. It worked, though. They all had their core classes together, but were split across their electives. Harry was in Arithmancy with Phoebe and Terence, and in Ancient Runes with Jasmine and Cassius. Astrid, Phoebe, Adrian, and Jasmine were in Care of Magical Creatures, and Terence, Adrian, Astrid, and Cassius were in Divination. No one took Muggle Studies. After getting through their core subjects together, they shuffled around to tackle the rest.

Everyone spent a lot of time in the library.

It wasn’t that different from what Harry usually did, except for one notable thing. Hermione Granger had successfully strong-armed Monty and Ron into studying. Harry was incredibly grateful for the studious little girl’s interest in making sure his brother got decent marks. Unlike Harry, she went out of the way to help her friends. Harry would help his when they asked, and they asked often, but he wasn’t making revision charts and holding their hands through every assignment.

And if he just so happened to be in the library the same time as Monty, that was a total coincidence.

Not many people had the stamina to study all day, or sit quietly for hours on end, and Harry’s friends would tap out early to go flying, play Exploding Snap, toss food at the Giant Squid, and generally enjoy what they could of the holiday. Harry had a break from gobstones

training after he, Charity, and Tracey Davis had qualified for the finals. Their first match was at the end of the holiday, and Charity was charitable enough to give them a reprieve.

As such, one afternoon Harry had got a table one aisle over from where his brother sat. It was a particularly nice day. The sun was out, the birds were singing. Beautiful weather for flying, which was what Harry's friends had run off to do.

The books Percy had checked out from the Restricted Section had been rather advanced, but contained some spells Harry was capable of performing. Spells for silent movement, to mask smell, to render oneself unnoticeable. That was the issue with Disillusionment. It camouflaged you, and at a high enough level could make you completely invisible, but that was all it did. It was an illusion, and illusions could be broken. But only if you noticed them.

Harry put these new spells to the test. The Concealment Charm, colloquially known as Notice-Me-Not—as opposed to Forget-Me-Not for the more vain magic user—was a simple incantation, *occultare*. It wasn't quite what Harry wanted, but close, as one only needed to draw attention to the concealed object for the spell to fall apart. Depending on the strength of the charm, of course. It was fascinating how the same incantation could yield such variable results, but Harry supposed it was in the nature of language to be reliant on context.

Suffice to say, in order to keep an eye on his brother, Harry had made free use of the Concealment Charm. Mostly he heard Monty and his friends talking—or in the case of Hermione and Ron, arguing—about their first year classes. Not the most riveting of topics. Harry wished he could help Monty with his homework, but Hermione was there and that had to be good enough.

On that particular afternoon, there was a disturbance in the library by the name of Rubeus Hagrid. Harry had never seen the man in the library. It was like a solar eclipse, particularly in how much light Hagrid was blocking. He could barely fit down the aisles, and the shelves didn't seem eager to make room for him.

Harry wasn't the only one to see Hagrid shuffling around.

"Hagrid!" Ron called out, far too loud for a library. "What are *you* doing in the library?"

Ron was not the most politic eleven-year-old. He gave Draco a run for his money.

"Just looking," Hagrid said shiftily.

Harry returned to his reading, not very interested in what Hagrid got up to in his free time. At least, not until Ron went to see which section Hagrid had been in.

"Dragons!" Ron exclaimed. "*From Egg to Inferno, a Dragon Keeper's Guide.*"

"Hagrid's always wanted a dragon," Monty said, "he told me so the first time I met him."

A terrible suspicion began to form in Harry's mind. He barely heard Ron inform Monty that yes, there were dragons native to Britain, and that dragon breeding had been outlawed nearly three centuries prior. He was concerned Monty's curiosity would get the better of him.

Sure enough, an hour later Monty and his friends made their way to Hagrid's hut. Harry followed close behind. He wasn't going to let Hagrid's pet dragon incinerate his little brother. Killing a dragon was a very dark thing to do, but Harry would strangle the beast like a chicken if he had to.

His caution was rewarded when he carefully spelled Hagrid's curtains open, just enough so he could see that a huge black egg was roasting in the fire.

He flipped through the dragon breeders' book Ron had left behind, and identified the egg as that of a Norwegian Ridgeback. A highly venomous species.

His brother was only a few feet away from it.

Harry fumbled for a Calming Draught, downing it swiftly. The procedure Andromeda Tonks had done could only be performed every six months, so he had to make do. After he got his breathing under control, Harry walked back to the castle and straight to Professor Snape's office.

"Severus, I take it your conversation with Hagrid went well?"

Severus was an adult, and had been for quite some time. He could resist the childish urge to roll his eyes at Albus Dumbledore. He was used to the headmaster making light of the most serious of situations. It was infuriating, but over a decade of working for the man had inured him.

His resolve wavered when Dumbledore chuckled.

"From your expression, I suppose that's a *no*."

"On the contrary, headmaster," Severus said, not taking a seat. He preferred to stand in Dumbledore's presence, as it gave him some measure of control. "It went as well as anyone could expect, given Hagrid narrowly escaped a stint in Azkaban. Bringing a dragon egg onto school grounds, of all the idiotic things. Surely this is cause for dismissal?"

Dumbledore smiled warmly at him. "No, I don't believe so, Severus. I've always trusted Hagrid. I'm sure if the egg had hatched he would have had it well under hand."

"It was a *Norwegian Ridgeback*," Severus all but hissed. "We have *hundreds* of children here, Albus. If you *would* recall, Ridgebacks were nearly driven to extinction due to their predilection for targeting children."

Dumbledore kept smiling. "I seem to recall they have a preference for whale calves."

"We do not teach *whale calves* at Hogwarts!"

Dumbledore chuckled again. “I suppose not, my dear boy. The Romanian reserve was quite happy to take the egg off of Hagrid’s hands. How fortunate for us young Charlie Weasley chose such a diverse reserve to work at. They’ll have a breeding pair now!”

“Marvelous,” Severus said drily. “I inquired as to where Hagrid purchased the egg. He informed me that he had not been illegally dealing in dragons—”

“Small mercies,” Dumbledore said happily.

“—but that he won it in a game of cards at the Hog’s Head.”

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “The Hog’s Head? Strange I didn’t hear of it...”

Severus did roll his eyes then. He had no interest in Dumbledore’s family drama. “Hagrid recalled little of the evening, but I did glean that the person never revealed their face. Hagrid was unable to identify them. After some...convincing...Hagrid was able to relay the conversation he had.”

Severus paused then. He disdained the use of occlumency to suppress his emotions, as the repercussions could be disastrous, but Hagrid’s abject stupidity was infuriating. Severus was often infuriated, though, and could manage his reaction. Teaching children how to work with volatile potions did that to a person.

“Albus,” he said, “Hagrid spoke of the cerberus.”

“Fluffy, yes,” Dumbledore said, his eyes sparkling.

“Fluffy,” Severus reluctantly agreed. “He told the stranger the key to getting past that creature.”

The sparkle intensified. “Ah, yes. As I recall, young Mr. Evans happened upon the information in a library book. I’ve since removed it, and all references to cerberi for the time being, but it seems the information has still got out.”

“Yes,” Severus said through gritted teeth. “Once again, I would like to raise my concerns regarding the...obstacle course...within the castle. Any child could get past such simple tricks, Albus. And now that the cerberus has been compromised, I see no reason to confine the creature to the castle. It’s been trapped in the same room for months, which by any metric is cruel.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t think you cared for the welfare of such a creature.”

“Someone has to,” Severus said, “and it seems I’m the only one willing to broach the subject!”

“I think Fluffy is perfectly fine where he is,” Dumbledore said. “He has plenty of food, plenty of room to run around. Hagrid visits him often.”

“He’s chained to the ground!”

“As most guard dogs are, yes,” Dumbledore said lightly.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. “The cerberus is not an effective guard dog, not anymore.”

Dumbledore stroked his beard again. Severus had the sudden impulse to burn it off.

“Fluffy is a known quantity, Severus,” the headmaster finally said. “We know his weaknesses, and can work around them. Put it from your mind, Severus. You’ve already done your part in protecting the Stone.”

“I see no reason why such an object must be stored in the castle,” Severus said. “Unless your intention is to lure the thief here? Even you wouldn’t be that irrational.”

“Oh, Severus,” Dumbledore said, as if speaking to a small child. “I have it well taken care of, I can assure you.”

“I am *not* assured.”

“You needn’t worry,” Dumbledore said. “It was Mr. Evans who discovered the egg?”

“Yet another disaster the boy has saved us from,” Severus said. “He followed Potter, Granger, and Weasley to Hagrid’s hut after overhearing a conversation in the library. Hagrid was apparently looking up information on dragon breeding. Strange how instructional guides on highly illegal activities are in the regular collection.”

“Very strange,” Dumbledore agreed. “I shall have to speak with Madam Pince, though I doubt she foresaw a student making practical use of such information. Mr. Evans followed Monty, you say?”

“I believe he was concerned about another highly dangerous creature getting loose,” Severus said. “That it happened to be Potter was pure coincidence. I *am* surprised Potter failed to exemplify the venerated traits of his house and inform his head of house, or any other staff member, about the egg.”

“Monty is quite close with Hagrid,” Dumbledore said, releasing his beard to steeple his fingers. “He has shown great loyalty to his friends.”

“With no regard for the danger such *loyalty* presents to those around him!”

Dumbledore gave him a pleasant look that Severus read as condescending. “He is only eleven, Severus. We cannot expect him to have the discernment of an adult.”

“Evans is thirteen,” he pointed out.

“And he has shown remarkably mature judgment for a boy his age,” Dumbledore said. “But we mustn’t measure the wheat of others by our own bushels.”

“What are you even talking about?” Severus asked, baffled. “The presumption of an educational institute is to do exactly that!”

“Perhaps, Severus, though it does some students a disservice. Alas, we are straying from the topic at hand. Was there anything else?”

“Regarding the dragon egg? No.”

“I’d ask you to stay for tea, but I’m afraid I know your answer,” Dumbledore said, standing up. “I shall speak with Hagrid myself now, soothe any ruffled feathers.”

“He was crying quite profusely,” Severus admitted, not feeling guilty at all. A dragon egg, honestly.

Severus left the headmaster’s office with Dumbledore, following him to the entrance hall. It was the middle of the night, and the castle was dark and silent. As he turned towards the stairs leading to the dungeons, Dumbledore stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. Severus wanted to throw it off.

He was not happy with the headmaster. Between the Philosopher’s Stone, the reintroduction of Fleamont *James* Potter to the magical world, trolls, and dragons, it had been a trying year. Not to mention Slytherin’s diminishing prospects for the Quidditch and House Cups. At least they’d get the Gobstones Cup, he was certain of that.

“Just one more thing, Severus,” Dumbledore said. He wasn’t smiling now, and Severus’ face tightened with concern.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Keep an eye on Mr. Evans, would you?”

It happened on an almost random day in April.

It was Sunday, the last day of the Easter holiday, and later that evening Harry had his first match in the gobstones final. His team was going against Ravenclaw, best two out of three. He was *really* looking forward to crushing them.

He was in the *Daily Prophet* archive once again, looking through the papers for November 1958. It wasn’t the most popular time of year for weddings, so there were few marriage announcements, and he was about to call it for the night when he saw it.

By a ceremony performed Thursday evening,

Miss Eileen Prince of Athelham

and Mr. Tobias Snape of Cokeworth

were married.

Mr. Snape is a muggle man...

Harry stared at it, not believing his eyes. His hands started to shake.

Eileen Prince.

Tobias Snape.

Snape.

Hiding Under Blankets

Chapter Summary

April/May 1992

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry sank to the floor, the damning paper still gripped in his hands. His little thestral, who he had named Benjy, landed on his head and began nibbling at his hair.

“Impossible,” Harry breathed, staring at the marriage announcement.

But it wasn’t. Harry *knew* who his father was.

Professor Snape—he had to keep thinking of him as *professor*, he *had* to—lived in a house very close to the one Harry’s mum had grown up in. He had flat out asked Harry if he had heard of Lily Evans. No one called his mum Lily Evans. To the world she was Lily Potter, Monty Potter’s dead mother, wife to James Potter. His mum had...she had...with his...his professor...

Harry couldn’t stop shaking. He could barely form a thought, and he fumbled in his robes for a Calming Draught, his fingers wrapping around the last vial. He’d have to go to Madam Pomfrey again. She had warned him about becoming overly reliant on it, to only take Calming Draught in times of great need. Well, this was a time of *extremely* great fucking need.

A few wet spots appeared on the paper, and the potion warred with his rising panic. He wiped his eyes. He couldn’t let anyone else see this. Ever. He jumped up and grabbed the other copies of that issue, almost setting them on fire before he remembered he was in a library and there were *definitely* spells against that. He reached for his bag and began to shove them all in before he remembered he would have to check them out or an alarm would be set off.

Cursing under his breath, Harry reluctantly put the issues away and shut the drawer. He’d have to come back with a solution later. Or maybe his da—Professor Snape would deal with it. Surely he would want to keep his so—his association with Harry a secret.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe there were other Snapes in Cokeworth and Harry had simply never heard of them. Maybe Snape was younger than he looked and went to Hogwarts *after* his mum, or maybe he’d been born out of wedlock and went *before*. But he hadn’t seen any birth announcements for his—Professor Snape. He’d have to look at those.

A bell rang through the library. It was closing time.

Nine o'clock.

The gobstones final.

"Shit," Harry said, leaving the room at a run. He had a match to play, how could he have forgotten? Charity was going to *murder* him!

Gobstones wasn't as popular in Ravenclaw as in other houses—meaning not at all—and their team was composed of only the particularly dedicated players. Charity played against Amina Randle, a third-year. Tracey went up against Michael Corner, another first-year. Harry played Marcus Belby, a second-year.

It started off pleasantly enough, despite the news Harry had very, very recently received and his attendant disorientation.

"Belby?" he asked. "Are you related to Damocles Belby? The inventor of the Wolfsbane Potion?"

"Did Snape tell you that?" Belby asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Professor Snape," Harry corrected automatically, refusing to react to the name. "And no, we learned about it in Defense."

"Figures he'd tell you," Belby said miserably. "Anything to get a laugh at *pants at Potions Belby*."

"That doesn't even alliterate," Harry said faintly, realizing that the professor so many people hated was actually his... "Well, do you know about the potion they use in bottle-washers?"

Harry wasn't one for small talk, or talking at length in general. It made his voice tired. But he wanted a distraction from the distracting thoughts of his paternity. Professor Sprout had noticed something was wrong as soon as he had run into the Great Hall, but he told her he was just tired from studying. Harry didn't think she bought it, but she let the matter drop. The Calming Draught helped keep him stable, but it couldn't stop Harry from thinking unless he took so much he passed out. Not only did he not have any left, but he doubted his...that Professor Snape would brew potions that could harm students.

Harry shuddered as he realized he'd been taking potions made by his own father for years.

Apparently Marcus Belby was also having a bad day. He wasn't playing well at all. Belby won the break, and his first shot scored Harry two points. Belby was sprayed by his own gobstone. Harry laughed despite himself, which further depressed Belby.

An overlooked quality of a gobstones player was the ability to laugh at oneself. There were only so many times you could stoically be sprayed in the face with what smelled and tasted

like liquid from the bottom of a skip.

Belby talked to himself, constantly. It was an endless monologue which Harry only caught bits and pieces of. What he did hear were stream-of-conscious complaints about homework, being hungry, his parents, and mumbling about the game.

Only one thing could have made Harry feel worse, so of course it happened. His body forcefully reminded him that people with ovaries had a habit of ovulating, and he struggled to keep his face blank as his uterus contracted to expel what must have been months of built up lining.

“Do you think your monologue could be a bit more internal?” Harry asked through clenched teeth.

Belby looked up at him with watery eyes.

“Mr. Evans,” Professor Sprout said, smiling warmly at him, “be a good sport, would you?”

“Sorry, professor,” he said, returning to the game.

Belby kept talking to himself, grating on Harry’s nerves. He played more aggressively than he normally did just so he could get the fuck out of there.

Charity took a bit longer, and Tracey the longest, but they came out of it with three wins. It didn’t make Harry feel any better.

They got back to the common room late, and it was mostly empty. Tracey shuffled sleepily off to bed. Charity drew Harry into a one-sided conversation rehashing their games, clapped him on the shoulder, then also went to her own dorm. Not wanting to linger in the open, Harry went to his as well.

Most of the other boys were asleep, but Cassius was up and reading something, lit by the glow of his wand.

“How did your game go?” Cassius asked quietly.

Harry gave him a weak smile. “Same as always.”

“Hmm.” Cassius looked up from his book as Harry passed. “Did something happen?”

“No,” Harry said, “it’s just been a long day.”

Harry bid Cassius good night, then hid in bed. There wasn’t much privacy in a boarding school. He slept in a room with three other boys, there were ghosts and portraits and house-elves. But, unlike students at a muggle boarding school, they had magic.

Harry enchanted his bed curtains with every spell he could think of. Silencing, imperturbability, repelling. He thought about transfiguring them to stone or something, but he was too tired.

Once he had exhausted his repertoire, Harry crawled into his blankets and hid his face in his pillows. He wrapped his arms around his stomach, biting his lip so hard he tasted blood. Harry didn't want to start crying, but a sob helplessly escaped. He knew he should go to the hospital wing, but it hurt too much to move, and he didn't feel like it anyway.

It was a relief to finally have an answer about who his father was. Could be. Probably was. That it was possibly Professor Snape...at least he wasn't dead, or in Azkaban. It might have been easier if he *was*, though, since Harry had no idea what to do with the information. Then he felt horrible for thinking that, and wondered what kind of awful son he was, why would Professor Snape want someone like *him*, Snape hated his brother, he'd been on Voldemort's side according to his mum, and Harry didn't think he liked children very much. Harry was nearly fourteen though, would that matter?

Harry knew that keeping someone's child from them wasn't a nice thing to do, even if there were valid reasons for it. Did Snape deserve to know? Was he entitled to? Did Harry have a right to keep the information from him?

Did he even want a son?

School started again the next day, but Harry elected to take a personal day and stayed in bed. He didn't know if anyone tried to get him up, whatever magic he had done in his disoriented state was too strong. He had barely slept, knew he should eat but didn't feel hungry, his eyes were itchy and dry. He felt horrible. Harry knew if he learned who his dad was there would be a caveat, his mum had *told* him. Staying up all night hadn't given him any ideas on how to move forward, and he just wanted to stop thinking at all.

Harry neglected to consider that him being in bed all day might herald a medical emergency. When the magic around his bed shattered, and the curtains parted to reveal Professor Snape, he had a panic attack. Harry did the only thing he could do and hid under his blankets.

"Mr. Evans," Snape drawled. "Are you under the impression that if you can't see me, I can't see you?"

Harry tightened the blankets around himself.

Snape sighed. "You neglected to attend any classes or meals all day. Several of your fellow Slytherins approached me out of concern for your well-being."

Harry shook his head, but didn't speak.

The blanket around him vanished.

“You need to see Madam Pomfrey,” Snape concluded. “You foolish boy, you should have gone to the hospital wing immediately.”

“I know,” Harry croaked. “I’m sorry.”

“Can you walk there on your own?”

“Yes,” Harry said, wincing as he sat up. He knew Snape could read minds, even if he didn’t call it that, but that he likely needed eye contact to do so. A master occlumens could also detect lies. Harry had to be careful about what he said.

He kept his eyes down as he unsteadily got to his feet. He was surprised to find his wand in his hand. It gave him some measure of comfort.

“Come along,” Snape said, sweeping out of the dormitory. Harry had never heard of Snape visiting one before. It made him feel worse. He was already causing trouble for the man.

Everyone was smart enough to mind their own business when Snape was around, not wanting to draw the man’s ire. It gave Harry a facsimile of privacy as he left the Slytherin dungeon and walked to the hospital wing.

“If you had reported to the hospital wing,” Snape said, “you would have been excused from classes. For your failure to do so, you will be serving an evening of detention.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said quietly. He wasn’t sure what time it was, but he thought it was after dinner. He didn’t care, he didn’t feel like eating.

He had the insane urge to just tell Snape right then and there, but they passed a portrait and Harry abandoned the idea. It was stupid.

In the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey fluttered around him, chastising him for not coming to her immediately, complaining about boys who suffered in silence, made him drink a bunch of potions, and stuffed him into a bed. Snape silently watched all of this, and Harry tried to ignore him. It was embarrassing, he felt so pathetic.

He didn’t know how to be someone’s son.

Harry stayed in hospital for a day, doing the homework his friends brought to him, eating the food he was given, drinking the potions he was handed. The pain shrank to a dull, tolerable ache.

Percy had looked in on him after getting his daily shot from Madam Pomfrey, reminding Harry that too many detentions would bar him from prefecthood, which Percy seemed to

believe he was destined for. Later that morning, Cedric brought him a flower he'd found on his way back from Herbology.

It was pretty and yellow and Harry could feel the magic in it, which made him a little sad. He didn't have the heart to tell Cedric he didn't like cut flowers, or in this case picked. The funeral home had given him a bouquet along with his gran's ashes. Cut flowers reminded him of dead things. He preferred them still alive.

Still, it was a sweet gesture, and he thanked Cedric, who blushed and hurried away to his next class. Madam Pomfrey conjured a cup and water for it, setting it on the nightstand.

Harry was surprised when Percy visited again around lunch. Percy froze for a moment, but sat in the chair next to Harry's bed. Harry closed the book he was reading and smiled at him.

"I've just got a letter from my brother Charles," Percy said. "He works on a dragon reserve. In Romania."

"I remember," Harry said.

"He has informed me of a newly hatched dragon," Percy continued. "A female Norwegian Ridgeback."

"Oh," Harry said. "About that..."

"Thank you," Percy said. "Ronald can be recalcitrant. I imagine he thought watching a dragon hatch was the height of adventure. I shudder to think what may have happened if the egg had not been reported."

Harry doubted Percy would ever do any shuddering. "You're welcome. I mean, Hagrid lives in a wood hut. It's mad to keep a dragon in there."

"True, very true," Percy said, straightening his already straight prefect badge and standing. "Well. Evans. I hope your recovery is swift. I must return to my duties."

"Bye, Weasley," Harry said. He went back to reading.

There was only a month until final exams, so Harry rallied and went back to class.

"Good to see you, Mr. Evans," Quirrell said insincerely. Harry wondered if anyone else heard it, or were they too distracted by the stutter? "We're continuing nocturnal beasts this week. Today's subject is incubi and succubi."

This drew some embarrassed laughs from his thirteen-year-old audience.

“This is no laughing matter, children,” Quirrell said. “You are all reaching the age where these creatures become viable threats. Merlin was allegedly fathered by an incubus. Such children are often rejected by their mothers or, in the reverse, their fathers.”

Quirrell’s face briefly twisted in pain, but cleared. He continued, “We will also be discussing impundulu, which are related to v-v-v-v-v...”

“Vampires?” Harry suggested.

“Thank you, Mr. Evans. Impundulu, similar to incubi and succubi, often take the form of beautiful men and women...”

Harry dutifully pretended to pay attention, ignoring the concerned looks from his friends. He hadn’t spoken much since being released from the hospital wing, or even while in hospital. His throat hurt from all the crying and trying not to cry. And he didn’t feel like talking at all.

Harry scribbled half-remembered lyrics from songs to fill up his parchment. He could scrape it off after the ink dried.

He didn’t *hate* that Snape was his dad. On the contrary, it could have been much, much worse. Someone like Rabastan LeStrange, or Sirius Black. He needed more information. *Was* Snape a Death Eater? Was he still loyal? Did he hate people like Harry’s mum? If so, why did...

“...and next week we will be discussing Night Terrors. Please turn in your essays by Friday. Class dismissed.”

Harry blinked, surprised an entire double period had passed him by. He mechanically packed his things up, thinking over which friend would give him the least shit for asking what the assignment was.

Harry did *not* want to go to Potions. He wasn’t ready. He was convinced Snape would instantly know what he knew. It was so obvious.

He broke out in hives and ended up in the hospital wing again. It only required a topical treatment, though, and Harry was callously sent to class.

“Today, you will be brewing the Awakening Potion,” Snape said, glaring at them from behind his desk. The dungeon room their class was in felt particularly small that day. Harry pulled at his collar, wishing he was anywhere else.

He copied down the instructions, even though he had already memorized the potion, just for something to do. An excuse to not look at Snape.

Snape was passionate about potion making. Harry was a rather indifferent potioneer. He liked that he could do it during summer, and thought it was fun to see how all the ingredients interacted, but wasn't very motivated to experiment with it. Harry preferred foolish wand-waving and incantations, the philosophy of magic. *How can we*, and *why should we*, that sort of thing.

At least he was in Slytherin. That had to count for something.

Harry grabbed his hair, frustrated with his thoughts. Being distracted in potions pissed Snape off, and was dangerous to boot.

"What," Snape said in a dark voice that promised eternal agony to whoever had angered him, "do you think you are doing?"

Harry jerked upright, terrified Snape was talking to him. He had barely started his potion, what had he done wrong? But Snape walked past him. Everyone turned to watch him chew out the Weasley twins, who had stuck themselves with their billywig stingers and had begun to float, giggling like madmen.

"I ought to puncture you two like the inflated buffoons you are." Snape waved his hand, and in an impressive display of magic two vials flew to him. "Fortunately for you, I brewed an antidote in anticipation of this asininity. No, Mr. Weasley, whichever one you are. If I wished to poison you, I would have done so years ago for my continued sanity. Now, get in your seats and get to work!"

Harry quickly turned back to his potion, being careful not to so much as scratch himself with a stinger. Snape didn't immediately return to his desk, though. He was slowly walking around them, checking on their progress.

"Terence," Harry hissed. "The fangs have to be ground finer than that."

"You say that every time," Terence complained.

"Do *you* want to drink chunky snake fangs?"

"I don't want to drink this at all," he said, looking into the thick, sickly brown liquid bubbling in their cauldron.

"The moondew will clarify it," Harry said.

"Correct, Mr. Evans," Snape said from right behind him. Harry gripped the vial of distilled moondew so hard he worried it would crack. "Five points to Slytherin. Mr. Higgs, those fangs need to be finer."

"Yes, sir," Terence said, grinning at Harry. Harry gave him a brief smile in return.

"Miss Rookwood, do those leaves look shredded to you?"

"Um," Jasmine said. "No?"

“Correct, Miss Rookwood. Get more from the ingredients cabinet. Quickly.”

“Yes, sir!”

“And Miss Spinnet...would you *please* explain what I’m looking at?”

Snape was on the other side of the room now, and Harry released his breath. “Alright,” he said to Terence. “The next step is...”

Harry made it to the end of the week without anyone noticing anything was wrong. Well, they did notice *something*, but Harry blamed it on his illness earlier in the week, or the gobstones tournament, or upcoming final exams. He had plenty of excuses.

By Sunday, the day of the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor gobstones matches, Harry had not returned to the *Daily Prophet* archive. He knew he needed to. To learn if Professor Snape’s mother was really Eileen Prince. To learn if he had been a Death Eater.

He didn’t really want to go to the gobstones match, but Charity wanted to loom over the competition. The audience was marginally larger, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor being the supposedly friendlier houses. It might have had to do with Monty Potter being in attendance, which surprised the shit out of Harry.

Harry understood as soon as the Gryffindor team entered the Great Hall. He recognized Lee Jordan and Kenneth Towler, both third-years, both in almost all of his classes. But their third teammate was none other than Neville Longbottom. He looked like he was going to be sick, but Neville often looked like that. Monty was talking to him though, giving his friend encouragement.

Soon the Great Hall was filled with the sounds of gobstones knocking into each other and people crying because they got something in their eyes. Charity was aggressively taking notes on all three games, barking instructions to Tracey and Greg. Professor Flitwick followed her around with a worried expression.

Harry glanced at where his brother stood next to Neville, and saw Monty had a pained expression and was rubbing his forehead. Not just his forehead. His famous scar. Harry had been drifting between all three games, keeping a particular eye on what Lee was up to. Lee might have been another quidditch fanatic, but he had a good eye for gobstones too.

“Is that sodalite?” Harry asked him.

“Iolite,” Lee replied without looking up.

“Interesting,” Harry said, walking away. He glanced at Kenneth Towler’s game against a first-year Hufflepuff girl, and kept walking until he reached Neville’s game. Harry recognized

his opponent as Hannah Abbott, another first-year. Monty had stepped away, still rubbing his forehead. Harry stopped next to him, eyes not leaving Neville's game.

"You should see Madam Pomfrey," he said in a low voice. "When I was feeling poorly, Professor Snape barged into my dormitory and dragged me to the hospital wing. I had a bunch of spells up because I didn't want anyone to know, but it didn't stop him. I think he would have levitated me there if I didn't walk on my own. I wonder what Professor McGonagall would do?"

With that, he continued his circuit of the room. Harry glanced at his brother, amused by the look of horror on his face. He was very concerned that Monty would endure a headache without asking for help. Did their aunt never give him paracetamol? Had anyone taken care of Monty when he was ill?

Harry felt a little disgusted with himself for being so wrapped up with his own problems. Monty had grown up sleeping in a cupboard, being *locked* in one without food. Harry recalled something about him being given a second bedroom, but someone could still be locked in a bedroom. He needed to do something about his brother's living situation. Monty was fine at Hogwarts, but summer was a few short weeks away.

As Neville apologized profusely to Hannah Abbott for winning, Harry began to plot.

Chapter End Notes

Hi!

The bus I was on broke down when I was on my way home after work, and I ended up making a nine hour [playlist](#) of what Harry might be listening to out in the muggle world. Probably on a crystal radio. Remember those?

No?

Unicorn Blood

Chapter Summary

May 1992

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry started with the day his mum had died. October 31st, 1981. The trials in the following weeks and months were all headline news. Sirius Black and the murder of Peter Pettigrew. The Lestranges and Barty Crouch Junior, the torturers of Alice and Frank Longbottom. Augustus Rookwood selling Ministry secrets, experimenting on muggles and muggleborns. Igor Karkaroff trading names for freedom. The Imperius defense employed by the Malfoys, the Parkinsons, the Crabbes and Goyles, Notts, Carrows, Averys, Greengrasses, backed by vaults filled with treasure. The murder of Fabian and Gideon Prewett, Percy's uncles, by Antonin Dolohov. On and on and on, dozens of Death Eaters, hundreds of allies and conspirators, raids on Knockturn Alley, on werewolf packs, on vampire covens, on manors and caves and rickety shacks.

And he found it. Severus Snape, no middle name. Perhaps his mother had never given him one, or he chose not to use it to detach himself from his muggle father. Birthdate January 9th, 1960. Cokeworth. Mere weeks before his mum had been born.

Harry found the issue from that date, and there it was, in black and white.

Snape . Eileen and Tobias

are pleased to announce the arrival of

Tertius Severus, January 9th, 1960...

"Tertius," Harry said to himself, biting his lip. A Prince family naming convention? The third? Harry wondered what his name would have been, had Professor Snape known. Probably Hadrianus. Primus Hadrianus? Primus Hadrianus Snape? Primus Hadrianus Prince?

"Primus sucks," Harry muttered humorlessly. He wrinkled his nose. It was no use speculating, his mum had taken that decision away from Professor Snape. For good reason, apparently. A halfblood Death Eater and a mudblood. What a pair.

He double checked that the door was locked, spread out the papers he needed, and took out his wand. He touched each paper in turn and performed the charm he had learned from Phoebe.

“*Geminio imago.*”

A ghostly impression of each page rose into the air, the pictures and symbols drunkenly bobbing until solidified by magic into identical replicas. Eileen Prince, Gobstones captain. Severus Snape, released from Azkaban on testimony from Albus Dumbledore. Lily Potter, murdered at 22, leaving her sons behind.

Harry gathered them up and hid them deep in the pages of his History of Magic book, putting the original papers back where he had found them. It was dinner, everyone would be in the Great Hall.

He Disillusioned himself, getting better and better with the spell, and left the library. Through several corridors, a dash across the entrance hall, into the safety of the dungeons, whispering *black adder* to a blank wall, hurrying into this dormitory, locking the door to the bathroom.

Harry leaned against the wall, gasping for breath. After a few minutes, when he was sure he was alone, sure he hadn't been followed, Harry removed his copied pictures and stuck them to a mirror.

He braced his hands on the sink and closed his eyes. The porcelain was cold under his fingers and helped ground him. He wasn't ready, but Harry looked up anyway.

He could immediately tell Eileen Prince and Professor Snape were related. The same dark hair and dark eyes—Harry looked at his reflection briefly, *his* same dark hair, dark eyes—thin lips, heavy brows. Snape's hair was thicker, though, oilier. Whether from his work with potions, or inherited from his father, Harry didn't know. It wasn't the sort of question you could ask your professor.

The noses were different too. Professor Snape had a prominent nose, a *Roman nose* as his gran would say. What she had said about Harry's own nose, though his had a smaller bump, almost wavy, turning slightly up near the end. Like his mum's had.

Harry closed his eyes, taking a moment, then looked at himself again. He already knew what features he'd got from his mum. The shape of his eyes, a mouth that took too easily to sulking, which he avoided at all costs, a rounder face.

If Lily Evans and Severus Snape had a child, he would look exactly like Harry.

Had his gran known? She must have, or at least suspected. Harry loved and missed her, but he could have had a father. If Snape wanted him.

He glanced at the mirror again. His gran had teased him about pouting when he was very young, and crying looked a lot like pouting when you were trying to hold back.

Looking at the mirror reminded him of the Mirror of Erised. That horrible thing had known, somehow. Harry hadn't even considered the message it was trying to convey. If he had been braver, he could have seen the rest of his family, like Monty had. Or maybe something else, some other piece of evidence.

It didn't matter. The headmaster had moved the mirror, or hopefully destroyed it. The piece of shit.

Harry took the pictures down, folding them over and leaving the bathroom. Inside of his trunk, under a false bottom he had managed to transfigure, Harry found the photo album he'd smuggled into the school. He tucked the pieces of newspaper into its pages and put it away. It was wildly incriminating if someone found it, but Harry doubted anyone would suspect muggle means of hiding things. No *revelio* would work here.

Harry neatly repacked his trunk, and as soon as the lid was shut the door opened.

"You're feeling better?" Terence asked, flopping onto his bed.

"Yeah," Harry said, standing up. "I was just about to go to the kitchen to get something to eat. Did you want to come?"

"Ah, sure," Terence said. "The others have a sketch due in Care, except Cassius, but apparently he's joined the Art Club?"

Harry shrugged. "He probably wants it for his CV."

Terence snorted. "Sounds about right. Come on, let's get there before the elves finish cleaning up."

Harry wasn't eager to play gobstones. The game had lost its luster, though his set hadn't. Charity made sure of that. It affected the friction, which amused Harry given how magic defied physics. Muggles had to spin themselves around or ride rockets into space to experience zero-G. He just had to wave a stick.

His match was against Hannah Abbott, the girl who had lost against Neville. She was a small first-year with blonde pigtails and a bright smile. She didn't seem very invested in winning or losing, simply happy to be there. Harry was glad Charity was playing against the Hufflepuff team's ace, Haruka Endo.

Harry had only spoken to her a few times, and she had been friendly enough, but the girl had been glaring at him the entire night. Harry understood as soon as her eyes went to Cedric. She was jealous.

It wasn't like Harry could tell Cedric to stop watching his game and watch hers instead. Or stop Cedric from complimenting him every turn. He also complimented Hannah, who

hummed happily to herself, her head bobbing to some tune only she heard.

Harry let the game go long, in part because Hannah was having fun, in part because having Cedric nearby made him feel better. It was rare that someone was so impressed with Harry's talent at a children's game.

Hannah started humming a new song, and Harry instantly recognized it.

"As I was going to Strawberry Fair, singing, singing, buttercups and daisies," he sang under his breath, flicking his bottle-washer. Hannah only had one gobstone left, and he easily knocked it out of the ring.

Hannah smiled up at him. "You have a lovely voice."

Harry blushed. He hadn't meant for anyone to hear. His gran used to play a record with that song on it, and she had loved to sing. When she still had the lungs to.

"Thank you," he said. "I think that's game."

They stood and shook hands, and Hannah skipped off to cheer on her teammates.

"You like singing?" Cedric asked.

Harry's blush renewed. He had *definitely* not meant for Cedric to hear. He knelt back down to gather up his stones, and Hannah's since she had forgotten.

"Not often," Harry said. "What about you?"

Cedric shrugged handsomely, as he did everything. "I like listening to music more. You know," he said, leaning in, "I heard the Weird Sisters are playing a show at the end of term. In the Forbidden Forest."

"They did that in second year," Harry said, glancing at where Professor McGonagall loomed. "Me and my friends used an aging potion to go."

Cedric's eyes widened. "In second year? You really *are* sneaky."

Harry was about to ask what he meant, but Charity let out a triumphant roar and the moment passed.

A moon-faced barn owl landed in front of Harry, stole the rest of his sausage, and flew away, leaving a letter behind.

"What's that?" Astrid asked, leaning into him. "It's not from those people again, is it?"

“What?” Harry asked, opening the letter. “I’ve got detention tonight. I have to report to Hagrid.”

“Is he going to have you muck out the hippogriff stables?” she asked. “They really need it.”

“If that’s all, I can just vanish it,” Harry said, putting the note away. He doubted he’d be mucking anything out at midnight. He wondered if working with Hagrid was part of the punishment. He had deprived the man of a baby dragon, and had spied into his home to do so. Harry knew the consequences of trading in dragon parts, and in turn hadn’t hesitated trading Monty’s safety for Hagrid’s freedom. It was only a few years in Azkaban, anyway, if you couldn’t afford the steep fine.

That evening, Harry forced himself to sleep during the few hours between dinner and midnight. When he woke, he left the dungeon with sixth-years on their way to Astronomy. They all knew he had detention, his second one of the year. If he *did* want to be a prefect, he’d have to break the habit. Marcus laughingly told him to not get bitten by a werewolf, while Charity gravely did the same.

“If you do, you better hope the last round doesn’t fall on a full moon,” she said, before storming up the stairs.

Harry was not pleased to see confirmation that it *was* a full moon that night. He could see the light on in Hagrid’s hut, and made his way across the grounds. Two large, shadowy figures stood in front of the hut, and one started to bark.

“Settle down, Fang,” a booming voice said. It was Hagrid, who had a crossbow nearly as big as his dog in one hand, a lantern in the other. “Harry Evans, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, stopping a few feet away.

“None of that *sir* business, just Hagrid.” Hagrid glanced at the moon. “The Forest is strange on a full moon, but it’s the best time for what we’re about tonight.”

“I know there are some werewolves that spend the night in there,” Harry said, “but they’re on the far eastern edge.”

“Yeah,” Hagrid said. “The headmaster’s bounded the area so they can’t cross over. But they aren’t the only ones to watch out for. Lots of things are empowered by the moon, including what we’re searching for.”

“What is it?” Harry asked.

“An injured unicorn,” Hagrid said grimly. Fang whined, then began biting one of his paws.

“Does that happen often?” Harry asked. “And are we the best people to approach unicorns?”

“No, never in my memory, and I’ve been at Hogwarts over fifty years,” Hagrid said. “And you’ll be fine. They don’t mind kids, and they know me. Right then, follow me.”

Harry got his wand out. He had heard Monty on the train telling Ron about Hagrid giving their cousin Dudley a pig's tail, something he had chosen not to snitch about as he knew something of Dudley's behavior towards his brother. It was human transfiguration, on a muggle child, using a broken wand. Hagrid could have killed Monty back then, if the spell backfired. So maybe Harry had been nursing a grudge against the gamekeeper. Hagrid seemed like a gentle person, and loved creatures enough to try hatching one of the deadliest on his own, but obviously had poor judgment. Very, very poor judgment.

"See that?" Hagrid said, stopping near the edge of the forest. He held the lantern out to a small bush with silver leaves. Harry moved closer, and realized it wasn't the leaves that were silver.

"That's unicorn blood," Hagrid said, lightly touching one of the leaves and rubbing the blood between his fingers. Harry waited for something to happen, but Hagrid was unharmed by this action. "This is a worse injury than the others I've found. We might have to...put it down."

Harry agreed. There was a lot of blood, and a lot more as they progressed deeper into the forest. He paused near a small pool of it, caught between the roots of a tree, and spelled some into an empty vial he had brought with him. Harry had no idea what unicorn blood could be used for, but he bet it was expensive.

Knowing he was getting the rare opportunity to venture into the Forbidden Forest, he had come prepared to harvest ingredients. He suspected that was part of the reason why Professor Snape had agreed to this detention, whoever had assigned it. He hadn't expected unicorn blood—who would?—but there was a ton of it, all over the place. The headmaster himself had discovered twelve uses for dragon's blood. How many did unicorn blood have?

Maybe giving Professor Snape several vials brimming with unicorn blood would soften the blow.

Harry had just tucked away another full vial, and spotted a nice patch of dittany, when Hagrid shouted, "Who's there?"

Harry ducked behind a fallen log. He'd been lulled into complacency with Hagrid and Fang around, forgetting he was in the middle of a magical forest. He didn't use *lumos*, not wanting to give himself away or lose his night vision, though for all he knew whatever had approached them feared light. He didn't know any spells for detecting creatures, but he knew they existed. It was an oversight he would soon correct.

"Elek? Is that you?" Hagrid said. Harry cautiously looked over the log, and saw Hagrid was speaking to an elderly centaur. Harry was awestruck. He had never seen a centaur in real life before.

"Good evening, Hagrid," said the centaur, his voice deep and melodic.

Elek was huge, able to speak face to face with Hagrid. His horse body was black coated, heavily muscled, with white feathered fetlocks. His human parts were also absurdly muscled, highlighted by rich brown skin that gleamed in the torchlight. His beard and hair were nearly pure white, strung with beads and wrapped by coils of thread in forest colors.

“Evans? You still hiding back there?” Hagrid called out.

Harry tore his eyes away. He hadn’t meant to stare. He clambered over the log and walked to Hagrid’s side.

“There we are,” Hagrid said, slapping Harry on the back with one giant hand, staggering him. “This here’s Harry Evans. We’ve been looking for an injured unicorn. Have you seen anything suspicious lately?”

Elek tipped his head to the sky. Harry kept his eyes firmly on the elder centaur’s face.

“Mars is bright,” Elek said.

Harry looked up too, but couldn’t see Mars through the dense canopy. “That means conflict, right?”

Elek looked at him, and Harry was struck by how very ancient his eyes were. “So they do teach something in that school of yours.”

“There wouldn’t be much point if they didn’t,” Harry said.

“I suppose not,” Elek said, smiling.

“We aren’t the only ones who can see Mars tonight,” Harry pointed out. “And it could herald any number of things.”

“Very true, child,” Elek said. “Even we, who have devoted our long lives to deciphering the messages sent to us by the stars, hear but a distant echo of those grand celestial movements.”

“That’s great and all,” Hagrid said, “but I was hoping you’d seen something in the *forest*, not the sky.”

“Many things, Hagrid. Many things.”

“Any injured unicorns?” Hagrid prompted, visibly growing frustrated.

“The cycle of destruction and rebirth is not for us to meddle in,” Elek said, frowning.

Hagrid sighed. “Alright then. We’ll be off, no need to let the poor thing suffer.” He began walking through the underbrush, Fang at his heels.

“It was nice meeting you,” Harry said, not knowing anything about centaur etiquette. They didn’t interact much with humans, and Harry couldn’t blame them given their *beast* designation by the Ministry, and the gradual destruction of their homes.

“The moon is low tonight,” Elek said cryptically.

“Thanks for letting me know,” Harry said, following the path Hagrid had broken. He spotted a few snapped stems of arnica, the flower Cedric had given him. Amusingly, it was poisonous. He levitated what he could into a jar, tucked it away, and hurried along.

“Why is the unicorn moving *away* from the castle?” Harry asked. They had been exploring the forest for a few hours, and the blood splatter had decreased. Luckily Fang had the scent, so they didn’t need to waste time searching for drops of silver.

“What do you mean?” Hagrid asked.

“Well, you said the unicorns know you,” Harry said. “So they’d know if they went to you that you’d be able to help them.”

Hagrid stopped walking, frowning. “I hadn’t thought of that,” he said.

That was obvious, but Harry refrained from saying so. “Maybe whatever attacked it is too dangerous, something you can’t handle?”

Hagrid’s face cleared, and he shook his head with a chuckle. “Doesn’t exist. I’m not exactly an easy target, Evans.”

“But what if it isn’t *from* the forest?” Harry asked. “What if—”

“Shh!” Hagrid said, raising his crossbow. “Did you hear that?”

Harry didn’t respond, looking around with his wand out.

“There!” Hagrid whispered harshly, creeping forward with surprising lightness for his size. “Stay back with Fang, but keep your wand at the ready.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, and this time Hagrid didn’t protest the title.

Hagrid had frozen in place. Harry moved to the side so he could get a better view.

The forest opened up to a clearing, lit silver by the full moon. In the center, splayed out, was a unicorn.

The sight broke Harry’s heart. His vision swam with tears, which he blinked away only for more to pool. He had never seen something so beautiful, so tragic, something so pure yet irrevocably defiled.

Fang pressed firmly against him, shivering, but there was no comfort to be found.

An abrupt movement caught his eye. Something tall and shadowy oozed out of the dark trees, gliding into the clearing. Harry watched, morbidly fascinated as this new creature latched onto the unicorn, making vile sucking noises as it began draining its blood.

Hagrid fired without warning. “Get off of her, you monster!”

A bolt struck the dark creature, but Harry couldn't tell if its body was hit, or if it even *had* a body. He elected to set the whole thing on fire while Hagrid readied another shot.

"*Incendio*," he whispered. He was too disturbed to try a wordless spell. Fire streamed out of his wand, and to his horror the creature batted it aside.

"Blimey," Hagrid rasped, taking another shot. The creature moved sinuously, and the bolt missed.

"*Incarcerous*," Harry tried, but the creature kept slithering around, moving as weightlessly as a ghost. If it *was* a ghost, or some kind of spirit, Harry was at a total loss. But it had to have some physical part, otherwise how would it consume blood?

"*Arresto momentum*," he muttered. Unless the creature could sense magic, it wouldn't be able to see the spell coming. It struck true, and the creature slowed, allowing Hagrid to plant a bolt in where the stomach would be for a person.

The creature shrieked, and Harry cringed away from the sound. Fang began barking frantically, scared out of his mind, then turned and ran away.

"*Silencio*!" Harry cried, just wanting the noise to end, but the creature was running, or flying, whatever the hell it did, and vanished from the clearing.

Hagrid was breathing heavily. "Well done, Evans," he said. "I think you're right. That *thing* ain't something the likes of us can tackle. I never seen anything like it."

"Will Fang be alright?" Harry asked.

"Bloody coward of a mutt," Hagrid said, walking heavily into the clearing. "He'll go straight home, don't you worry. Where are those ruddy centaurs when you need them..."

Harry cautiously followed Hagrid, not dropping his guard, coming to a stop next to the dead unicorn. He was still crying, he had no control over it.

"I'm sorry," he said, touching the unicorn's stiff and cold flank. It was wrong, so incredibly wrong. "Are we taking her with us? To the other unicorns?"

"She belongs to the forest," Hagrid said, brushing her shimmering mane. "Taking bits of a killed unicorn ain't the same as freely given."

Harry's heart thudded, but he was certain Hagrid would have said something if he had noticed what Harry had done. And he hadn't said it was *wrong*, only that it wasn't the same.

Still, Harry wondered.

Chapter End Notes

It's fun to see which parts of the story you all are interested in! My cats are looking at me weird.

Potioneers

Chapter Summary

May 1992

Harry focused on the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor matches, studiously avoiding looking at Professor Snape.

Telling his professor the truth immediately before finals sounded like a really bad idea to Harry, and it gave him some measure of relief when he decided to wait until *after* to approach Professor Snape. That way, if things went poorly, he could hop onto the Hogwarts Express and fuck off to Cokeworth for the summer. He could hide in his house. His friends could owl him food.

It was the perfect plan.

Harry was happy to see Marcus Belby thrown further off his already poor game by Snape's intimidating presence. The only downside was Neville was affected too. Monty hadn't come this time, likely forewarned that his most hated professor would be supervising.

All the other games had wrapped up, one victory and one loss for each team. It all came down to Neville and Belby.

It was anyone's game.

"Any day now, Longbottom," Snape said, his voice dripping with condescension. "Merlin knows if you take any longer people will have the misapprehension that you're *strategizing*."

Harry crossed his arms, uncomfortable. Professor Snape picking on first-years was different from his dad doing it, and Harry had never been fond of the former. And he had a vested interest in Ravenclaw losing.

"What do you think about Longbottom's form?" he asked Charity, a little loudly. She was standing next to him, frowning thoughtfully at the game.

"He's got a good seat," she said. "And see," she said, pointing. "Look at the angle of his wrist to the ground. He's cack-handed like you, always have to compensate for that, could go too far right. Longbottom doesn't have that issue, seems like he's been playing for years. Needs a bit more polishing. It's a shame I'm graduating next year, he's one to look out for. Now, Belby," she said, shaking her head. "Belby, Belby, Belby."

"What?" Belby asked, looking up. Neville seized the opportunity to take a shot, and Belby flinched away as he was blasted in the face.

“That’s a foul, professor,” Harry said, glancing at Snape. “Avoidance.”

Snape stared at him for a moment, then sighed. “I am perfectly aware, Evans. Longbottom, take your penalty.”

The game ended soon after, in Neville’s victory.

“It would have been better for us if Ravenclaw had won,” Charity said as they walked back to the common room. They hadn’t really needed to watch the round, and knowing Snape would be there Harry hadn’t wanted to, but gobstones was criminally underrated. It was important for the game overall for players to support each other.

“Tracey’s going to have a hard time against Longbottom,” Charity continued. “And Jordan. Let’s hope she doesn’t get either in the draw.” She shook her head. “I don’t like leaving it to luck.”

“We can still get two out of three,” Harry pointed out. “Jordan’s the one to watch out for. He’s more confident than Longbottom, and has the skill to back it up.”

“True,” Charity said, biting a nail. “Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw have got two losses, their game next week is a fight over third. Us and Gryffindor are both two-nil. The tournament could have been called for us *tonight*. Damn Belby…”

They reached the entrance to their common room, and as the wall was opening when someone spoke out.

“Mr. Evans, if I may speak with you?”

Charity hurried inside, and the wall closed up again, leaving Harry alone with Professor Snape.

Harry kept his eyes down. “Yes, sir?”

“Follow me.”

Harry dutifully followed Snape further into the dungeon, to the man’s office. He took the seat Snape gestured to and waited.

A few minutes passed in silence.

“Mr. Evans,” Snape finally said. “Has something…happened?”

Harry was immediately relieved. “No, nothing happened,” he said carefully.

“I can assure you my eyes are still located in my head, and not rolling around the floor.”

Harry glanced up and saw Snape frowning at him.

“Perhaps your encounter with the as of yet unidentified creature in the Forbidden Forest had a more profound effect on you than initially believed,” Snape suggested, sneering a little in

distaste.

“No, sir,” Harry said.

Snape kept watching him. Harry knew the silence was meant to make him uncomfortable, but he used to go weeks on end without speaking to anyone else. No, he was uncomfortable because Snape could read minds and, seeing him so close up, Harry was certain of their relation.

“Why did you defend Longbottom?”

Harry tried not to react, but wasn’t sure he succeeded. He had thought he was being subtle. Of course, he had known what Charity would say. Analyzing other players took up a significant portion of their team meetings.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say, sir,” Harry said.

“The truth, Mr. Evans,” Snape said.

Harry resisted the urge to wrap his arms around himself. It would just make him look weak. “The truth is, well, Longbottom’s an orphan, or as good as...” His eyes strayed to Snape’s covered left arm, and his eyes widened in understanding. “It’s because of their parents, isn’t it?”

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “Excuse me?”

“Their parents,” Harry repeated. “The Longbottoms were aurors, the Weasleys—well, the Prewetts, but they’re related—were in the Order of the Phoenix, and so were the Potters. It’s because of their parents, that’s why you hate them. Because they were—”

Harry stopped talking. He had been too excited by understanding Snape’s motives to realize how much he had almost given away.

“How,” Snape said slowly, “did you hear of the Order?”

Interesting. Snape hadn’t denied being a Death Eater. Then again, it wasn’t a secret, though most students wouldn’t even know unless told by their parents, or if they were inclined to read papers from a decade ago.

Harry looked down again once Snape’s question registered, annoyed with himself. “It’s mentioned in some articles from...that time.”

“I see,” Snape said. “And you believe my...previous affiliation...influences my behavior towards some select students?”

“What other reason is there?” Harry asked. “You don’t act like that towards Crabbe or Goyle, and I know they’re worse at potions. Or Malfoy. And their parents were all...”

They lapsed into silence again, until Snape said, “How very noble of you, Mr. Evans, to take such a vested interest in first-years of another house. It seems *Mr. Diggory* has had some

influence on you.”

Snape was looking at him very intently. Why had he emphasized Cedric’s name like that? Harry was a little embarrassed that his...professor had noticed him and Cedric hanging out sometimes. It wasn’t even that often, they had only recently become friends, notwithstanding Cedric’s obvious crush and Harry’s growing feelings towards the other boy.

Was there some reason why Snape had mentioned Cedric?

“Cedric, I mean, Diggory is always looking out for other people, regardless of their house,” Harry said, looking expectantly at Snape. He nodded for Harry to go on. “That’s...what prefects do?”

Snape leaned back. “Indeed, Mr. Evans. Though perhaps in the future you may wish to temper your criticisms of how we professors interact with our students.”

Harry looked down again. He didn’t want people to hate Snape, though with his history as a Death Eater it was inevitable, and he didn’t want Monty to be a target. Would his brother being better at Potions help? Was it Lily *and* James Potter Snape hated? Harry’s mum specifically? Because of her being muggleborn? If that was the case, why had they...

Harry stopped that line of thinking, a little squeamish. He decided to bring something up, now that he had the opportunity.

“Professor,” Harry said, “I heard something...strange...on the train.”

Snape raised an eyebrow, and Harry was struck by how similar the expression was to his own. “And you’re only now thinking to report it?”

“It’s a bit sensitive,” Harry said, “and I didn’t think it was my place to go around telling people about someone else’s home life.”

“Whose?” Snape asked, lacing his fingers together.

Harry bit his lip, then said, “Monty Potter.”

Snape snorted. “Another spoiled brat, just like his father.”

Now that was *very* interesting. Did Snape hate James Potter for marrying his mum? Well, maybe Snape shouldn’t have been a Death Eater.

“No, professor, I don’t think he’s spoiled. I happened to be in the same compartment since everywhere else was full, and I heard Potter talking about how his relatives treat him. His aunt and uncle,” Harry clarified. “Petunia and Vernon Dursley.”

Snape’s expression darkened. If he was friends with Lily, he must have known Petunia too. “Exaggerated, I’m sure. But go on, Mr. Evans, enlighten me.”

Harry hesitated again. Would Snape use this information *against* Monty? Then again, Monty hadn’t been shy in telling total strangers.

“They...they locked him in a cupboard, sir. He said it was his room. Sometimes for days at a time, without food. He was beaten up a lot by his cousin. It sounded like his aunt and uncle might have hit him too. And they never told him about...anything. Not his parents, or magic.”

Snape’s face was blank. Harry desperately hoped that he wasn’t the kind of person who would turn a blind eye to a child being mistreated. It happened all the time in Cokeworth, under the guise of minding one’s own business. Or were Death Eaters okay with muggles abusing magical children?

“It doesn’t sound safe for him in that house,” Harry said, looking, for the first time in weeks, directly at Snape’s eyes. “I wasn’t sure who to tell, or if it was even my business to tell, but —”

“I shall bring your concerns to the headmaster,” Snape said abruptly, surprising Harry. “*If* what you are saying is true, it is a very dangerous situation. Magical children in such... circumstances...may have strong episodes of accidental magic. In extreme cases, their own magic can turn on them.”

“Right,” Harry said, disappointed Snape was apparently more concerned with Monty breaking the Statute of Secrecy by blowing up their relatives than his actual welfare.

It was better than nothing.

Severus watched Harry Evans leave his office, then leaned back, thinking about the student who reminded him of his old friend more than her own son did.

Evans had the same righteous indignation as Lily, though the boy was far more discreet about it, and it had only really surfaced over the past year. Severus had attributed it to Quirrell’s abominable teaching, the boy’s medical regimen, or perhaps the very loud cohort of Slytherin first-years and a certain Malfoy who had inherited his father’s predilection for making a spectacle of himself. Diggory as an influence was quite plausible, better than Evans having too much interest in a certain celebrity, and he was pleased that Evans had picked up on that. He had a brain in his head, as opposed to the wool most students had stuffed in there.

Evans also had the uncanny ability to silently convey how very little he thought of someone, however presumptuous it was for a student to tell *him* how he ought to be treating other students. Evans was clearly unimpressed, though he did try to hide it. Snape was too amused at being reminded of *himself* to comment on it, though. Minerva wouldn’t have stood for it, nor Severus with any other student.

Severus sighed as he thought over what Evans had actually told him. The knowledge that Monty Potter had been raised in the muggle world had spread like wildfire early in the school year. Minerva had a sour expression for weeks, worse than usual. Severus wondered if she

had known exactly who had raised the Boy Who Lived. He had erroneously assumed it was a squib family, people who knew about magic but were sufficiently distant from the magical world to keep Potter out of the public eye. And he had *very* little occasion to think about Potter over the years.

If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear...Help me protect Lily's son.

The son of *James Potter*, the spitting image of him. Looking at Monty Potter was like seeing James that first time on the train. Hearing Draco Malfoy rant about how Potter had refused to shake his hand gave the impression their first meeting had been much the same as Severus' own. Like father, like son.

It was galling for a thirteen-year-old to remark on his behavior, far worse than the headmaster, who habitually treated everyone like a child. *You see what you expect to see, Severus.*

Not raised by squibs who would hero-worship the boy. No, raised by *Petunia Dursley*, a singularly horrendous person who Severus had also not thought about in many years. He knew how Petunia had treated Lily, had treated *him*. How far would she go with her own nephew? Did she even comprehend what Monty Potter meant to their world?

Severus put his face in his hands. He didn't want to deal with anything Potter-related. Potter wasn't even in his house; now *that* would have been a true disaster. By all rights Minerva should have looked into her own student's welfare, particularly if she had known who had raised him! Dumbledore could have asked him if Petunia was an adequate guardian for a magical child! The number of times he had almost *accidentally* killed his own father, only for his mother to throw herself in the way...

He stood up.

What was done was done. Evans had come to him with information—though Severus would omit his source—and he was obliged to act on it lest the boy get it in his head to go to the headmaster directly. Or worse, the *Daily Prophet*.

Severus doubted Dumbledore would be pleased if the muggles he so loved were vilified by their entire community for mistreating their savior.

One morning, Harry reported to Madam Pomfrey for his usual injection. Harry had no idea where she was getting the muggle drug from, but she always had it. However, instead of the needle Harry was used to, Madam Pomfrey approached him with a potion.

"It's complete!" she announced. "Professor Snape had cleared it for use. Now, you're meant to take this once a month, the same time *every* month. It should put a stop to your *cycle* too,

which the muggle drug would have eventually done. But, as a wizard, well, the potion will interact better than whatever the muggles make it out of!”

Harry took the cup and looked into it. “It’s very...red,” he said dumbly.

“Of course it is!” Madam Pomfrey said. She leaned down to whisper, “One of the main ingredients is impundulu blood. I had to vet everything, given your allergies. Severus confided he put considerable effort into researching his own family’s records to create this. Go on, drink up!”

Stunned, Harry did just that. It was thick and oddly sweet, and he wondered if Professor Snape had intended for it to be palatable. It was a kind gesture. His...his dad had invented a potion just for him. Using his family’s— *their* family’s—own historical records.

“So,” Madam Pomfrey said, “how do you feel?”

Harry thought about it, tried to concentrate on how the potion was working in his body. “I feel—”

He slapped a hand over his mouth.

Madam Pomfrey’s eyes sparkled with delight. “Oh, that *is* remarkable! It works much faster than the muggle drugs, doesn’t it?”

Harry was a little afraid of speaking again. It wasn’t a *huge* change, but he didn’t sound as... girly. “People are going to notice this.”

Madam Pomfrey tutted dismissively. “Just say you’ve got a cold, dear. Now, I need to run a few tests...”

Harry sat still as Madam Pomfrey did her tests, answering each question as well as he could. He was still gobsmacked by the entire thing.

His dad—or would Snape prefer something more formal? They were from Cokeworth, but he *was*, well...Snape didn’t *sound* like he was from Cokeworth, probably to fit in better with all the pureblood Slytherins when he was at school. Harry could not imagine saying something as pretentious as *my father* à la Draco Malfoy. Though he had never minded when Percy called his parents like that.

Aside from the issue of what to call Professor Snape, at least in his own head, Harry wondered what he could possibly do for the man to repay him for creating such a life-changing potion for him. He had all that unicorn blood, which frankly made Harry uneasy, but he imagined more of a *By the way, I’m the son my mum hid from you after she got up the duff in seventh year. Sorry? Here’s some rare blood I found in the woods, cheers* scenario.

It was good his dad already knew all about the whole intersex thing. It would have been a nightmare trying to explain it to some half-mad Azkaban inmate, not to mention the possibility of being rejected because of it, or because of his mum, or any number of factors that would make him undesirable as a son.

He left the hospital wing with instructions to return immediately if anything felt wrong. Exams were a little over a week away, and the castle was relatively quiet so early in the morning. Harry made it to the entrance hall just as Cedric and some other Hufflepuffs from their year were coming up. Harry knew them all by name now. Haruka Endo, the jealous girl who was now ignoring him. Hecate Oakham, a stout girl who smiled kindly at him. Melvin Catterick, who punched Cedric's shoulder affably, then nodded at Harry before herding the others into the Great Hall.

"Good morning," Harry said. He coughed. "Sorry, got a bit of a cold."

"Um, good morning," Cedric said. The morning light streaming through the windows limned Cedric in gold. It was ridiculous how flattering it was. "You were just at the hospital wing?"

"Yeah," Harry said, doing another fake cough.

"And right before exams, too," Cedric said sympathetically. "Would you...I was going to study in the library later. Did you want to study together?"

Cedric rubbed his arm, looking shyly at Harry with a self-effacing smile.

Harry pretended to think it over, moving closer to Cedric. He was feeling oddly confident. Was it the potion?

"Yeah," Harry said, smiling back at him. "What are we studying?"

Harry was slightly dismayed to find his tentatively named *study date* with Cedric had an audience of approximately the entire school. Cedric simply could not turn down anyone who asked him for help, and he had a *ton* of friends. Harry had no idea where his own friends were, probably somewhere laughing at him being drawn into the center of Cedric's sphere of influence.

An issue with studying with others was that Harry really didn't need help with his studies. The kinds of questions he had about the material were too advanced for other third-years to answer, or even fourth-years. It was less *studying together* than Harry helping Cedric study, and all of Cedric's friends. But Cedric always turned to him first when a new question arose, smiling encouragingly, praising Harry for his grasp of third-year concepts.

Cedric was very attentive, too, making sure Harry's fake illness wasn't getting worse.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked during a rare moment when they were alone at their table.

"I am," Harry said, looking up from his parchment. He hadn't taken notes for quite some time, but instead was practicing his penmanship. He wasn't happy with his Greek letters yet, they came out wonky. He had been thinking about the coincidence of Snape being his dad. It made sense, with all the facts laid out, but still, who would have thought?

“Do you believe in destiny?” Harry asked idly.

“What?” Cedric asked. “Are you talking about prophecy? I’m not in Divination, but maybe Haruka knows something?”

Harry sighed quietly, standing up. “I’ll be right back, I want to find a certain book. Maybe we can practice some transfiguration when I get back?”

Cedric smiled brightly. “It’s my best subject!”

Harry smiled back, then walked deeper into the library. He had seen Monty and his friends walk by earlier, and was happy to spot the frizzy mass of Hermione’s hair. It had been getting increasingly voluminous as exams neared. Today, she was clearly agitated, talking rather loudly at Ron, who had gone red as a beet and was matching her for volume. Monty was hiding behind a massive book.

“Madam Pince is going to kick you out if you keep that up,” Harry said, smiling as all three of them jumped. “If you’re going to make a racket, you should use a silencing charm.”

Hermione lifted her chin, fixing him with a glare. “Magic isn’t allowed in the library. I would expect you to know!”

Harry took out his wand, ignoring her. “*Smyltnes*.”

Monty looked up from his book. “What was that?”

“He did magic!” Hermione said, pointing at Harry. “In the library!”

“What?” Ron asked.

Benjy the thestral, who had been flying around, landed on the table next to Monty.

“What *is* that?” he asked.

“What is *what*?” Hermione demanded. “Honestly, Monty, are you even studying?”

“You can’t just study magic,” Harry said, drawing Hermione’s attention again. “You need to *practice* the spells. And potions, too.”

“We aren’t allowed to brew outside of class,” Hermione said.

“So you’d rather fail your exam?” Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It *would* help to make the potions we’re studying, instead of just memorizing the recipe,” Monty said, frowning. “I’m not very good at potions, Hermione.”

“Only because Snape isn’t fair!” Ron exclaimed.

“*Professor* Snape,” Hermione snapped.

Harry watched for a moment as the two started up again, then picked up Benjy and gestured for Monty to follow. The silencing barrier fell apart when he walked through it. If Hermione and Ron got themselves kicked out, it wasn't his problem.

"There's something I want to show you," he said quietly to his brother.

"Is it that horse-thing?" Monty asked.

"It's called a thestral, and this is just a model of one. We've got real ones in the forest," Harry explained, checking down aisles. He vaguely recalled seeing it in that section...

"Why can I see it but Ron and Hermione can't?" Monty asked.

"Thestrals have a bad reputation," Harry said, trying to gently break it to his brother. "I saw my...a relative die. That's why I can see them."

"Oh," Monty said in a small voice. Harry felt bad about bringing up their dead mum, but it was simply how thestrals worked. "So what did you want to show me?"

"Here it is," Harry said. They were in one of the dustier parts of the library. He knew it didn't *have* to be dusty, but the books were generally boring enough to collect the dust themselves. "Watch out for dust bunnies. They bite."

"R-right," Monty said, watching curiously as Harry pulled out an old issue of *Potioneers, Periodically*.

"They publish patents," Harry explained, flipping through the pages. "Here we go. *Sleekeazy's Hair Potion and Scalp Treatment, patented by Fleamont Henry Potter in 1935*. You might want to tell your friend Granger about it."

"Potter?" Monty said. "Wait, *Fleamont*?"

"He was your grandfather," Harry explained. "I think he and your grandmother, Euphemia, passed away from dragon pox before you were born."

Monty looked so sad at hearing this. Harry wanted to hug him, like his gran used to hug *him* when he was sad, but he doubted Monty would appreciate it. So he patted his brother's messy curls.

"I didn't mean to upset you," Harry said. "I wanted to show you that you come from a long line of famous potioneers. I heard your mum was really good at potions too. I bet you're brilliant at it, you just need to practice more. It's a lot like cooking, isn't it?"

Monty nodded. "That's why I was looking forward to it, but Sn—Professor Snape is kind of...you know? And some of the, uh, other students in class throw things into our cauldrons."

"Then you should learn some spells to protect your cauldron from interference," Harry said. "And practice more so you can counteract anything they add to your potion. You're not allowed to do magic over summer, you know, but you *can* do potions."

Monty perked up. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I do, and I’ve never got in trouble for it. Also,” he said, dropping his voice to a whisper. “Professor Snape *always* puts the Forgetfulness Potion on the first year exam. It’s tricky because even the fumes can affect your memory, so you’ve *really* got to know what you’re doing.”

Harry straightened again. “I’ve got to get back to studying.”

“Thanks,” Monty said. “I didn’t know...I never thought there would be stuff about my family in a library.”

“You’d be surprised what you can find in here,” Harry said. “The spell I used earlier is called the Imperturbable Charm. It’s a common household charm, parents use it all the time.” So Harry had read, at least. “See you around, Potter.”

“Wait,” Monty said, grabbing Harry’s sleeve. “Why do you keep helping me? Ron says Slytherins always have an ulterior motive.”

Harry almost laughed, but saw his brother was being serious. “I don’t have any ulterior motive. I think that a lot of things have been kept from you, and you deserve to know them. You miss out on a lot growing up muggle. It takes a great deal of work to catch up.”

“Is that what you had to do?” Monty asked, looking up at him. Harry wondered how much longer he would be taller than his brother.

“Yes,” Harry admitted. “And what I *should* get back to doing. Don’t forget to actually *do* magic, Potter.”

“I’ve only ever tried spells in class,” Monty said quietly. “It doesn’t...it didn’t feel real.”

Harry closed his eyes, wondering if he was getting in over his head, then put his hands on his brother’s shoulders. Monty’s eyes went wide.

“You’re a wizard, Monty. You’ve *always* had magic. Nothing is going to take that away from you. *Ever*. Not mean professors, or annoying classmates, or those muggles you live with. Okay?”

Monty looked back at him with determination. “Okay, I get it. I’ve got a lot to prove, and I need to practice spells more.”

That wasn’t *quite* what Harry had been going for, but whatever. “Great.”

Harry ended up walking his brother back to where Hermione and Ron were, and Harry was glad to see they had finally settled down. They both gave him suspicious looks, but Monty was happy so Harry didn’t care.

As he walked away, Benjy landed on his head and laid down. People often focused on not being able to *see* thestrals. They couldn’t hear them, either, or observe them via any sense.

Thestrals were dead useful.

“Do you think you could find him?” Harry whispered.

Benjy shrieked in confirmation, and Harry smiled to himself.

Seven Years Bad Luck

Chapter Summary

June 1992

Charity put her arms around Harry and Tracey, pulling them into a huddle.

“This is the best we could hope for,” she whispered, looking them each in the eye. “Davis, Towler’s got weak eyes. You hit him hard and fast.”

Tracey’s glasses flashed menacingly. “Yes, captain!”

“Evans.”

“Yeah?”

“No quarter. ”

“I will not fail you.”

She hugged them roughly.

“I could not ask for a better team,” Charity said, her voice thick with emotion. “This is our year. Now go out there and grab them by the stones!”

“We really need to talk about phrasing,” Harry said.

“Never!”

It was the final gobstones match, Slytherin and Gryffindor. There was an unusually large audience, at least twenty people, which made Harry nervous. He wasn’t used to it.

There were his friends of course, some of Charity’s and Tracey’s, the other members of their team, some people from Gryffindor like Monty, Hermione, all of the Weasleys—including Percy, who Harry thought would be too busy studying for OWLs—Oliver Wood confusingly, the other gobstones teams, *all* of the heads of house, the house ghosts, *and* the headmaster. And Cedric, with some of his friends from Hufflepuff.

“Good turn out,” Charity said, clapping Harry on the shoulder. “Let’s give them a show, Evans.”

Harry glanced at the gobstones trophy, set on a pillar in the center of the Great Hall. They would never find his body if he lost. Harry walked over to Lee Jordan, who was tossing his

bottle-washer in one hand.

“Evans,” he said.

“Jordan,” Harry said, nodding at him.

“This is it,” Lee said. “The big one.”

“Yep,” Harry said, kneeling. There was a line drawn in chalk. Whoever’s gobstone got closer would go first.

Professor Flitwick was supervising the final round, and he squeaked out, “Shoot!”

There was a crack in the floor, right on the edge of the line. Harry’s stone flew through the air and landed in it, wobbling to a stop.

Lee gaped at him.

“Distance is incomprehensible and therefore meaningless,” Harry quoted, standing up to retrieve his bottle-washer. He glanced at Professor Snape, who was smiling faintly. That was right, he had said *a friend* of his had liked the *Hitchhiker’s Guide*. He must have meant Harry’s mum.

“What?” Lee said, following him back to the ring.

“Alba gu bràth!” Charity shouted. Neville stared up at her, a few gobstones slipping through his fingers.

“Saorsa no bàs!” Astrid shouted back, while Professor McGonagall covered her face in exasperation.

“What?” Lee repeated, kneeling down. Flitwick stopped next to them and held his hands out. Harry and Lee dropped their gobstones in, and Flitwick let them fall into the ring.

“I want good, clean games!” Flitwick said, moving on to Tracey and Kenneth Towler. “Knuckles down!”

Harry did just that, grinning up at Lee. He had charmed his retainers all black for the occasion.

“I know what those are,” Lee said, narrowing his eyes. “You can’t scare me like that, Evans.”

Harry ignored that, his eyes darting around the ring. “Thirteen stones,” he said. “Thirteen lives.”

“*Wha*—argh!” Lee garbled, his mouth unfortunately open as Harry scored three points. Fred and George Weasley were immediately at his side with water.

“Interference!” Charity cried. “Interference!”

“That’s a penalty shot for Mr. Evans,” Flitwick said. “Miss Lament, please focus on your own game!”

“Nice one, Harry!” Cedric called out. Harry looked over his shoulder and blushed at Cedric’s earnest expression.

“Trying to show off for your boyfriend?” Lee asked, wiping his face.

“He’s *not* my boyfriend,” Harry mumbled, scoring another point. Lee made sure to keep his mouth closed.

“Suitor,” Lee said. “Beau. Your *young man*.”

“Tonks was a better commentator,” Harry said. Lee missed his shot.

“You take that back! You *filthy, lying—*”

“Mr. Jordan!” McGonagall snapped.

“Let me at him!” Astrid shrieked, trying to break out of Adrian’s hold. “How *dare* you impugn his honor! Fiend! Scoundrel!”

“Astrid, it’s just gobstones! Calm down!”

“Miss Urquhart, if you do not restrain yourself, I’m afraid I am going to have to ask you to leave!”

Harry focused on the game. He could not control the chaos erupting around him.

It only took a few more rounds for him to win. Tracey had won against Kenneth Towler, though the game had nearly tied with one of her gobstones right at the edge of the ring. Charity wiped the floor with poor Neville, but she was whispering something to the mousy boy, and he was nodding frantically.

“It’s a sweep!” Flitwick declared, carrying the gobstones trophy to Charity. This year it had been animated, sort of like a gobstones fountain. Charity held it over her head, tears streaming down her face. Tracey looked up at him with big, watery eyes, so Harry gave her a brief hug.

“I didn’t know gobstones could be played like that,” he heard his brother say to his friends.

“I don’t think it is, usually,” Hermione said, looking around the room. The floor looked sort of like a giant clown had sicked up. It was very colorful, and very disgusting.

“Marvelous,” the headmaster said, wiping his eyes. Harry assumed it was the fumes. “Such wonderful young people, putting the *gob* back in *gobstones*.”

Snape looked to the charmed ceiling as if to find salvation in its starry nightscape, then approached their team. “Nothing less than I expected,” he said, looking over them approvingly.

Charity slung an arm around Harry's neck, nearly strangling him, while someone tackled him from behind, probably Astrid. Snape shook his head, then walked away to shake hands with McGonagall.

It was a pretty good night. Shame exams started the next day.

Harry had an obscene exam schedule for Monday. Transfiguration, Charms, Arithmancy, and Ancient Runes. Not many people took both Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, just him and a few Ravenclaws, and they shared a wearied camaraderie as they sat for back to back exams. At least OWLs were split up over two weeks. Harry was curious how Percy was going to take *twelve* of them.

Tuesday was better, with only Potions during the day. He slept until his Astronomy exam at midnight. Then came Wednesday with History of Magic first thing. Someone had wafted Professor Binns into the room to watch over them. It felt more like a wake than an exam. Herbology was livelier as Harry shot fire at Devil's Snare cuttings to herd them into pots.

Finally, on Thursday, it was Defense Against the Dark Arts. Quirrell had been getting paler and shakier as exams progressed, and Harry was honestly surprised there was a practical portion. The man could barely hold his wand.

Harry performed the spells on the dummy as requested, ignoring how Quirrell watching him made his skin crawl, and left the exam room, relieved that it was all over.

Harry wasn't very worried about his own grades, and never quite got why his friends were so concerned about exams. The entire exam process made little sense to him; when else in his life would he be made to answer questions without being able to check a book, or talk to someone else? On a desert island?

It was very artificial, and very annoying. Tests were the worst part of school.

What stressed him out was his brother taking exams, concern about Monty passing. He knew the first-years had History of Magic last, the most soporific of subjects. As he and his friends spilled onto the sunny school grounds, Phoebe throwing herself onto the grass and sobbing in relief, Harry looked around for his brother. He spotted Monty by the lake, sitting under a beech tree with his friends, smiling and laughing. Monty winced and rubbed his forehead for a moment, but Harry chalked it up to a headache.

"What about you, Harry?"

He looked over at Astrid, who was searching through the grass for something.

"What?"

She sighed and sat back. “Summer plans? Jasmine's going to Gwada with her mum. Everyone else is taking off, too.”

“Not me,” Harry said. “I'll probably hide inside all day.”

“You should visit,” Astrid said, plucking a blade of grass and pressing it between her hands. “Or I can visit you.”

Harry shook his head. “There's nothing to do where I live.” It wasn't exactly true, but he doubted Astrid wanted to smoke and drink in a car park until the cops chased them out.

“Then you can come to my house,” she said. “My parents won't mind.”

“I'll think about it,” Harry said, sitting down next to her.

Astrid blew into her hands, making a duck-like sound. “Is it those people you live with?”

“What?” Harry asked, confused until he remembered it wasn't normal for a kid to live on their own. He'd been doing it for nearly six years.

“Your guardians or whatever,” she said.

Harry looked towards the Black Lake, at the Giant Squid waving his tentacles in the air as some people tossed things for him to catch. “There's no one like that. I've lived alone since I was eight.”

Astrid stared at him. “You're not joking.”

“No,” Harry said, hugging his knees.

“Then you *have* to visit,” Astrid decided. “I'll tell my parents—”

“Don't tell *anyone*,” Harry said, worried he'd made the wrong decision.

“You didn't let me finish,” she snapped. “I'll tell them you've got permission. We can forge a letter or something, or you can visit for the day and I'll sneak you in at night.”

Harry sat quietly for a moment. He *did* want to see his Hogwarts friends over the summer. They all had families and money and things to do. He had no idea how his dad would react to his end-of-term surprise son, and it would be awkward running into him in Cokeworth.

“Alright,” he finally said. “I'll think of something.”

Quirinus charmed the harp to play itself. Chopin's Funeral March, to amuse his master. He opened the trap door and floated past the Devil's Snare. His forged letter from the Ministry,

summoning Dumbledore for some vague urgent business, had been some of his best work. Dumbledore had finally left the castle, content his little tricks would keep the Stone safe.

Quirinus felt along a wall, then tapped the rune sequence that disabled the traps.

He searched through the fallen keys, accidentally stepping on the one he needed. Quirinus thought about fixing the wing, but he'd be long gone by the time anyone noticed.

He walked past the lifeless chess pieces, killed the troll when it back talked him, ignored Severus' cute little riddle—he gritted his teeth at the pain his master gave him for that thought—and walked through the flameless doorway.

Quirinus paused when he saw the mirror. It must have been a recent addition.

“Dumbledore,” his master hissed. “That is the Mirror of Erised, Quirinus. It shows the heart's deepest desire. And your deepest desire is to serve me, is it not?”

“Yes, master,” Quirinus said, stepping in front of the mirror. “I see myself finding the stone in the mirror.”

“Where is it?”

“In the mirror,” Quirinus repeated.

His master was silent, which did not bode well for him.

“Turn around, Quirinus,” his master said. “I shall look into the mirror myself.”

Quirinus did so, carefully removing the turban and avoiding touching his master directly. He had learned *that* lesson early on.

The room filled with a creaky, high-pitched laugh.

“Clever, Dumbledore, but not clever enough. Quirinus!”

“Yes, master?”

“We need someone else. An intermediary,” his master said. “A student, Quirinus.”

Quirinus checked his watch. It was just before dinner, and he would be missed if he didn't go. He needed the mirror, and some pretense for summoning a student.

He thought of all the exams he still had to grade and smiled.

“Harry Evans?”

Dinner had just ended, and Harry was going back to the common room with his friends. They were headed into the dungeons, but Harry paused at the top of the staircase. A girl he thought was from Hufflepuff ran up to him holding a note. Harry took it from her.

“Susan!”

“Coming!” the girl said, running off to rejoin her friends. “Has anyone seen Cedric?”

“What’s that?” Adrian asked, having also stopped.

Harry unfolded the paper. “It’s from Quirrell. He wants to talk about my exam.”

“Already?” Adrian asked. “It’s only been a few hours!”

Harry shook his head and put the note away. “I’ll go see what he wants.”

“Better you than me,” Adrian said, continuing into the dungeon.

Harry changed direction and went upstairs to Quirrell’s office on the second floor. The corridors were empty, most people preferring to rest after days of exams, or in the case of OWL and NEWT students, to continue studying.

The general opinion on Quirrell was relief he’d be gone by the end of the year, at least as the Defense professor. Harry didn’t know what to think about him, other than a general distrust. It had been months since the incident on Halloween, and nothing had happened after that. Professor Snape had assured him it was an accident of sorts, that the headmaster had looked into it. Maybe Quirrell *had* intended to bring a dark creature to class and had got in over his head?

Harry made sure his wand was in easy reach and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Quirrell’s shaky voice called.

Harry opened the door.

“Close it behind you, Mr. Evans. We wouldn’t want anyone to overhear.”

Frowning, Harry closed the door. “You wanted to see me, professor?”

Quirrell was sitting behind his desk, stacks of parchment surrounding him. He held a quill dripping with red ink, and looked up at Harry’s approach.

“Yes, Mr. Evans,” Quirrell said, standing up. “This way.”

“What is it, sir?” Harry asked, following Quirrell to the storage room. Quirrell unlocked it with a tap of his wand, and the door swung open.

“I need you to do something for me, Mr. Evans,” Quirrell said, his stutter vanishing, his voice growing colder. “I need you to *find* something for me.”

Quirrell stepped aside, and Harry saw the Mirror of Erised.

“The headmaster put that in here?” Harry asked.

“Oh,” Quirrell said, smiling. “Are you familiar, Mr. Evans?”

“It’s the Mirror of Erised,” Harry said, wondering if it had been meant to be part of their exam. Why else would Dumbledore give it to Quirrell to look after?

Suddenly, Quirrell grabbed his shoulders and forced Harry to face the mirror. “Inside of this mirror is a stone, Mr. Evans. The Philosopher’s Stone. Have you heard of it?”

“Yes,” Harry said, cringing as Quirrell’s fingers dug into him.

“You will find the Stone for me, or I cannot guarantee Mr. Diggory’s safety,” Quirrell hissed. “Tell me what you see.”

Swallowing, Harry looked into the mirror. “It doesn’t work when two people are looking. I just see you and me.”

Quirrell released him, and Harry stumbled forward. He grabbed his wand and spun around, but Quirrell had already drawn his own.

“The troll wasn’t an accident,” Harry said, wondering if Quirrell was as bad at defense as he pretended to be. Someone would notice he was missing. Where was Cedric? What had Quirrell done to him?

Quirrell chuckled. “Are you trying to stall, Mr. Evans? It won’t work. Look into the mirror. You only have to *find* the stone, remember that.”

“What about Potter’s broom being jinxed?” Harry asked. “If you’ve attacked one student, that suggests you’d attack another.”

Quirrell grinned at him, his eyes wild.

“Why do you need the Philosopher’s Stone?” Harry asked, gripping his wand. “Gold? Immortality?” His eyes narrowed. “That was *you* in the forest. Hagrid shot you!”

“Oh yes,” Quirrell said, stroking his wand. “Oh *yes*, Mr. Evans. I was *quite* upset. My master was *very* displeased.”

“Master?” Harry asked. “But you weren’t injured. I would have noticed something like that.”

“Would you?” Quirrell asked. “Unicorn blood can keep you alive, even on the brink of death. Now, enough talk! Find the Stone!”

“*He cannot be magically compelled, the enchantment will know,*” a high, contemptuous voice said.

“Yes, master,” Quirrell said, his demeanor changing to that of a terrified servant.

“Who was that?” Harry asked, looking around. But the storage room was small. Just him, the mirror, and Quirrell.

“Find the Stone,” Quirrell repeated, his breathing labored. “Find the stone, and the Diggory boy will live.”

“Okay,” Harry said, turning back to face the mirror. He only saw himself, pale and scared, holding a wand he hadn’t managed to do anything with. There weren’t any dead mothers or grandparents this time, just Harry. Then his reflection pulled a blood-red stone from his pocket.

“What the hell?” Harry muttered.

“What is it?” Quirrell demanded. “What do you see?”

“Me holding a red stone,” Harry said, watching as the reflection put the stone back into his pocket. There was a corresponding weight in his own pocket. “I thought it would show me where I could find it.”

“Useless,” Quirrell said, pacing back and forth. “Utterly *useless*.”

Harry turned to watch him warily. Quirrell was blocking the door, so Harry backed away towards the mirror.

“I told you I wanted the boy, Quirinus,” the voice said. *“You chose this one...”*

Quirrell’s face twisted in pain and anger, and he pointed his wand at Harry. “If you cannot retrieve the stone for me, there is no *use* for you, Mr. Evans.”

Harry dove behind the Mirror of Erised.

“Avada Kedavra!”

“No! You fool!”

“Protego maxima!” Harry cried, just as the Mirror of Erised exploded, rocking the castle around him. Even behind his shield, Harry was thrown back, cracking his head against a wall.

Harry opened his eyes. The mirror, and most of the room, were gone. He stood up, wary of bits of stone falling from the ceiling. He still had his shield, absolutely useless if Quirrell tried another Killing Curse. He’d actually tried to *kill* him.

Someone had to have heard the explosion. A portrait, a ghost, *anyone*. Harry touched the back of his head, wincing. His fingers came away bloody.

Unnerved, he cautiously moved forward, leaving the ruined storage room. He feared the ceiling would collapse on him if he stayed. He held his wand out, blinking his eyes to try to clear his vision. It took him a moment to find Quirrell. Rather, what was left of his professor.

The explosion had obliterated most of Quirrell's body, at least the front half. Harry tried not to look at it too closely. There was a strange mist rising from his turban, and Harry pointed his wand at it, wondering what the fuck it was.

"*Harry Evans...*" a terrible, sibilant voice said. Harry watched, dumbstruck, as the mist coalesced into red eyes in a stark white face.

"What are you?" Harry asked. "*Who* are you?"

"*Harry Evans,*" the creature said again. "*I will remember you...*"

The door flew open, revealing the headmaster in all of his glory. He had his wand in hand, and Harry's eyes were drawn to it. He'd never seen one quite like it.

"I suspected you were after the Stone," Dumbledore said. "Lord Voldemort."

"Lord..." Harry said, swaying unsteadily.

Voldemort, or whatever he had become, gave an ear-piercing shriek and fled, vanishing through a wall. Footsteps pounded down the corridor, and several other professors burst in. It was Snape and McGonagall, wands at the ready. McGonagall gasped at the state of the room.

"Quirinus," she whispered, voice trembling. "Albus, what has happened here?"

Snape ignored Quirrell's mangled body, looking at Harry instead, his face tight with concern.

"D...professor," Harry mumbled. "He said he had Cedric." He couldn't stop shaking. Someone had tried to *kill* him.

Harry's eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he blacked out.

Congratulations

Chapter Summary

June 1992

Chapter Notes

I cried while writing parts of this, but I cry a lot, so.

Harry could hear the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw match from his bed in the hospital wing. Professor Snape had caught him before he hit his head again, and carried him there. Harry hadn't been badly injured, and Madam Pomfrey fixed up his head, plied him with Calming Draught, but she wanted to keep him for observation. Harry suspected the headmaster wanted to keep him isolated.

There was a book open on his lap, but he hadn't turned a page in hours. His thoughts were stuck in a loop. Voldemort, Monty, Quirrell.

Voldemort had been alive the whole time. He had wanted Quirrell to get *the boy*. Voldemort had been possessing their Defense professor for the entire year. Eyes on the back of his head. Watching.

Harry Evans...I will remember you...

Harry gripped the book in his hands. It had all happened so quickly, he had barely understood what was going on. Find the stone, Cedric in danger, an unfamiliar voice that sent shivers of disgust down his spine, the explosion...

"And Gryffindor scores again!" came Lee Jordan's voice through his magical megaphone. "That was Alicia Spinnet, new on the team this year. That's 170 to 20, Gryffindor..."

Harry had slept for a day after...what had happened. He had woken in the middle of the night, or early in the morning, the day of the final quidditch match. The headmaster had been sitting next to his bed, smiling beatifically. He thought back on their conversation.

“Good evening, Mr. Evans,” Dumbledore said. “Or perhaps it should be good morning?”

Harry reached for his head, which didn’t hurt anymore. He hadn’t realized how *much* it had hurt. His fingers met bandages, wrapped around his head like a turban. He shied away from the comparison, pushing himself up and looking at the headmaster. Dumbledore was smiling warmly at him.

What had happened? The note from Quirrell, the mirror, green light, an explosion, the sick sound of his own head cracking open, Quirrell’s charred and bleeding body, limbs twisted, crushed organs and broken bones, a hole where his face should have been, the turban slipping off, bloodsoaked, the mist...

“The...” Harry began. He wasn’t sure *what* to call Voldemort in front of Dumbledore, but went for the safe option. “You-Know-Who. He’s back.”

“Lord Voldemort,” Dumbledore said. Harry looked at him, wondering what point he was trying to make. “And not quite, Mr. Evans. Not quite. No, I suspect not getting his hands on the Philosopher’s Stone has been a significant setback, as was the loss of poor Quirinus.”

“Poor,” Harry said flatly. “Cedric?”

Dumbledore’s smile broadened. “Fear not, Mr. Evans. Mr. Diggory is perfectly well. Pomona found him safe and sound in his dormitory, albeit a little confused as to her discomfiture. Quirinus had sent Miss Bones with a note for Mr. Diggory, but she had been unable to find him in time.”

Harry relaxed, releasing the blankets gripped in his hands.

“Why was the Philosopher’s Stone in the Mirror of Erised?” he asked.

“Ah, yes,” Dumbledore said, sitting back. Harry didn’t exactly feel comfortable with the headmaster so close. Harry knew Dumbledore was over a century old, not unusual for a witch or wizard, but *old* nevertheless. And as his brain slowly started working again, Harry began feeling angry with the headmaster. How long had Quirrell been possessed? The entire year? An entire year with regular access to Monty? Attempting to murder his brother? Right under Dumbledore’s nose?

“...has been destroyed,” Dumbledore was saying.

“What?” Harry asked. “Why?”

“Nicolas and I have had a little chat, and we agreed it was for the best,” Dumbledore said.

Harry pressed a palm to his eye, a headache forming. “If you were going to destroy the Stone anyway, why was it even here?”

“This is something of a last resort,” Dumbledore said. “The Stone cannot be kept safe, not even by one such as myself. While it is a unique and fascinating alchemical construct, in the wrong hands the Stone could be used to disastrous ends.”

“They could just make another one,” Harry pointed out, squeezing his eyes shut.

“I believe Nicolas and Perenelle intend for the knowledge to die with them,” Dumbledore said. “Six hundred years is quite a long time to be alive. People who seek immortality are often surprised by what they find.”

“Immortality,” Harry mumbled, suddenly feeling sleepy. Had Dumbledore cast a spell on him?

“I shall not disturb you further, Mr. Evans,” Dumbledore said, standing up. “Lest Poppy chase me out. I simply wanted to inform you of the status quo, as it were. I strongly suggest you keep the events of last night to yourself, my dear boy. Sleep well.”

“He’s done it! Monty Potter’s got the snitch!”

The roar of the crowd shook Harry from his memory. It didn’t feel like he had slept at all, though he must have. He wasn’t happy to have missed Monty’s last game of the year, and winning his first Quidditch Cup—with those scores there was no doubt about it—but Harry was glad he didn’t have to be around so many people.

He didn’t know how many people actually knew what had happened that night. Dumbledore, obviously, Snape, McGonagall, Madam Pomfrey. Flitwick and Sprout. Did anyone know about *Voldemort*, wraith form or not? Harry suspected they didn’t, otherwise they wouldn’t be screaming their heads off at a quidditch match. Did Harry *want* people to know? His little brother? *Oh, by the way, the prick who killed our mum is a disembodied spirit who possessed our defense professor?*

Harry would want to know. He would want to be prepared.

Would anyone even believe him?

He looked down at the book on his lap. *Guide to Advanced Occlumency*. He had found it upon waking, and strongly suspected who had left it. Harry felt himself shaking again and tried to breathe slowly, in and out, like Madam Pomfrey had taught him. He had almost called Professor Snape...in front of the headmaster...

Why did his dad want him to get better at occlumency? Did he know? Had he read the truth in Harry’s eyes? Was Voldemort a legilimens? Dumbledore?

Harry disliked the conclusions he came to, didn’t like the interest he had drawn from the old, powerful, and apparently not dead.

He wrapped his arms around himself, book forgotten.

Better him than Monty.

Madam Pomfrey set him free for the end-of-term feast. The main thing enjoyable about it, for Harry, was his little brother's happiness at Gryffindor winning the House Cup. Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were thrilled too, while a pall of misery settled over the Slytherin table. They all knew it shouldn't matter that much. They didn't even get anything for having the most points, except bragging rights. The seventh-years were the most depressed about it, ending their time at Hogwarts at a low.

Harry had got some consolation points for his confrontation with Quirrell. He hadn't really *done* anything except survive, which was actually quite impressive against an adult wizard who was hosting the wraith of the most dangerous dark wizard of the century. It didn't make a difference, though, nor did their gobstones win. Gryffindor was just too far ahead, and the general consensus was that Monty Potter was to blame. His brother's already poor stock in Slytherin had plummeted. Harry didn't think there was anything he could do about it. Monty was a celebrity, of no fault of his own, and that inevitably came with detractors. If anything, based on the looks the Slytherin table was getting, throwing them under the bus was a bonus.

So the Great Hall was draped in scarlet and gold, a rampant lion towered over them, roaring in victory. The headmaster congratulated Gryffindor house, McGonagall amicably shook hands with her fellow heads of house, Hagrid drank himself red in the face, and they feasted on what the hardworking house-elves beneath them sent up.

"It's *bullshite*," Astrid grumbled at his side, stabbing angrily at a turnip. "After what you did, we should have won."

Harry was glad no one else was paying attention to them, otherwise he would have had to explain to anyone within earshot. Him being confined to the hospital wing was a regular enough occurrence to not elicit suspicion. But that it happened the same night he had been summoned by Quirrell, the same night Quirrell had *disappeared*, was notable.

He had told Astrid the gist of it, that Quirrell had been possessed and attacked him, but left out everything about Voldemort and the Philosopher's Stone. All Astrid said was she had known something was fishy about Quirrell, glad Harry was alive, and didn't press him for details. He didn't want to talk about it anyway. He had to relive it in his nightmares as it was.

Adrian pointed a fork at them from across the table. "What are you two plotting?"

Harry looked at Astrid, who raised her eyebrows. "About the thing in the forest, after the Leaving Feast next week."

"You doing that potion again?" Adrian asked.

Harry shrugged. "Other third-years are going."

Adrian waggled his eyebrows. "Like a certain seeker?"

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Hey, Terence...”

“You’re not funny, Evans,” Adrian said, dodging a roll thrown at him by Astrid. It continued its trajectory towards the Ravenclaw table and, amazingly, bonked Penelope Clearwater in the head. She turned around to take points before realizing it was far too late for it to matter.

Harry put his wand away.

“I saw that,” Astrid whispered.

“I haven’t the foggiest idea to what you refer, madam,” Harry said. “If she didn’t want to get hit with bread, she shouldn’t have stuck her head in the way.”

“Well reasoned,” Astrid said prissily, before breaking down into snickering.

Harry kept a straight face a moment longer, then started laughing too. It sounded strange in his ears, but it made him feel a little lighter.

“I don’t get it,” Adrian said.

“Color me surprised,” Cassius said drolly. “Pass the mint sauce, would you?”

Exams results came a week after Quirrell’s death.

Harry blinked at his Defense grade.

Adrian looked over and whistled. “At least he finished grading before he kicked it.”

Harry glanced at Astrid and shook his head. He still hadn’t told her all the gory details. No one really needed to know what it looked like for someone to be blown apart, or what the backlash of magic felt like clinging to your skin, the rank stench of sizzling flesh, the *taste* of it...

He looked at his grade again.

“What’s that mean?” Phoebe asked, also looking.

“What is it?” Charity asked. She was still riding the high of their gobstones victory. Given that was pretty much all Slytherin had to show for interhouse competitions, public opinion was slowly changing.

“Harry’s got an O with a little star,” Phoebe said.

“Really?” Charity said. “He’s got over a hundred percent on it, then.”

“I didn’t even know that was possible,” Harry said quietly, emotions warring within him. Who the hell had given him that grade? Quirrell? Or was it Voldemort? What was the point of Quirrell being such a miserable teacher? He barely noticed when Cassius took his results out of his hands to show around.

“How do you do it?” Phoebe demanded.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Straight Os!”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It just happens.”

“There’s got to be some sort of trick to it,” she insisted, peering into his face. Harry leaned away.

“I just study,” Harry said, jumping when someone touched his shoulder.

“There’s no substitute for hard work,” Cedric said from behind him. “Uh, hi. I was going to ask...me and a few mates are putting together a quidditch game. Do you want to play?”

“Harry doesn’t like quidditch,” Adrian said, gnawing on a kipper. He jumped, spitting the fish out. “Fuck! What was that for?”

“What he *means*,” Jasmine said, batting her eyes, “is that Harry is more of a *fan*. Isn’t that right, Harry?”

Cedric looked at him hopefully.

“I like watching my friends play,” Harry said, just as Astrid sprinted past them in full keeper gear, pulling Terence along with her and shouting about a pickup game.

“Do you want to watch?” Cedric asked. Harry was a little impressed he’d come to the Slytherin table by himself. Cedric didn’t even seem aware of all the looks they were getting.

“Yeah,” Harry said, exam results forgotten. “I’d like that.”

There was a lot of food and a lot of crying at the Leaving Feast, which was par for the course. For the seventh-years, this was the last night they would spend at Hogwarts, after calling it their home for a significant portion of their lives. The Head Girl Eliza Burke gave a speech, as did quidditch team captain Viridia Lestrange. Their heads of house, the headmaster, a very sorrowful Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, the Head Boy, a Hufflepuff named Gabe Truman and Eliza’s polar opposite.

Peeves set off fireworks and the Great Hall was evacuated, and a good number of students took the opportunity to scamper off to the Forbidden Forest for their last hurrah.

Harry wasn't keen on returning to the Forbidden Forest, even with so many people around. The last time was yet another recurring nightmare, more frequent now that he knew that creature had been Voldemort possessing Quirrell. The dead and mutilated unicorn alone was enough to haunt him, he didn't need an actual wraith on top of that.

But it was the Weird Sisters, Astrid's favorite band. They had a lot of fans in the magical world, given the small music scene, and what had happened to Stubby Boardman of The Hobgoblins.

Since he was there, and Astrid was flopping around like a fish, Harry taught her the delicate art of slam dancing. It wasn't really the music for it, but it was fun pushing each other around. Harry was surprised when Cedric joined in, and a little embarrassed, but eventually got back into it.

When the band took a break, they carried each other to where drinks were serving themselves.

"Magic is brilliant," Harry panted, feeling overwhelmed. He'd almost forgot where he was. Cedric passed him a goblet and Harry took a sip without looking. It was butterbeer, and it amplified how buzzy he felt, how detached from himself and his shitty life.

He took another sip, looking at Cedric over the rim of his goblet. Cedric's hair was a mess, and his cheeks were flushed. Harry's gaze lingered on his lips, and he realized with a start that Cedric was saying something.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Can I owl you?" Cedric asked, running a hand through his hair. It made it worse. "Over holiday, I mean."

Harry blushed, then nodded.

"Cedric!" someone called out.

Cedric made a face, then grinned at Harry. "I'll be right back."

"Okay," Harry said, watching him walk over to a few people Harry vaguely recognized. He turned away, looking over the crowd while sipping his drink. One thread of conversation caught his attention.

"Penelope and I are going to the theater in London," someone was saying. Harry glanced over and saw Percy talking to some other prefects, Penelope at his side. "Her father is getting the tickets. I'm sure you are familiar with Reginald Clearwater?"

Harry killed the rest of his drink and set the goblet down a little hard. He froze when he saw Percy walking towards him.

“Pardon me,” Percy said, frowning at the table. Harry knew it was all things Percy couldn’t have much of, if at all. “Oh, Evans, didn’t see you there. Just getting some drinks.”

Harry took out his wand and pointed it at an empty cup. “*Aguamenti.*”

Percy stared at it, then picked the cup up. “Thank you, though I could have done that myself.”

“But would you have?” Harry said softly.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” Harry said. “How did OWLs go?”

“Quite well,” Percy said, picking up another cup, one filled with shimmering butterbeer. “I expect to get all twelve.”

“That’s impressive,” Harry said.

“Yes, well, William did twelve. It is only expected that I too am capable of such a feat.”

“Still,” Harry said, feeling a little awkward.

“The results should be owled in a fortnight,” Percy continued. “I imagine you’re most interested in how I fared in Muggle Studies?” Given he was holding two drinks, Percy pushed his glasses up with his upper arm. “I shall forward my grade.”

“That sounds great,” Harry said, a little confused. “Or we could write to each other normally. As friends. I haven’t got an owl, though.”

“Hermes is equal to the task,” Percy said. “Well. Good to see you, Evans.”

Harry smiled. “You as well, Weasley.”

He watched Percy return to Penelope, and was soon distracted by Cedric returning with several people, Phoebe and Jasmine conspiring to steal his retainers for some obscure reason, Adrian jumping out of a tree and breaking his ankle, Fred and George Weasley setting off fireworks, and the Weird Sisters playing many, many encores.

Then the centaurs showed up and everybody ran, screaming and laughing all the way back to the castle, into the welcoming arms of Mr. Filch and Mrs. Norris.

It was the perfect time. After breakfast, before the carriages left. Harry had left it for the very last moment.

He had almost changed his mind a dozen times. Voldemort wasn't dead. He was a wraith, leeching life from what people and creatures he possessed, but alive nevertheless. Professor Snape had been a Death Eater. Would he return to his former master?

But Albus Dumbledore himself had spoken in Snape's defense, spared him from a lifetime in Azkaban for whatever crimes he had committed. Torture, murder, who knew what. The *Daily Prophet* was selective in what it reported, and Harry didn't know what the Ministry made public record, if anything.

Dumbledore had given Snape a job at Hogwarts, made him head of Slytherin. Would Dumbledore have trusted Snape with the future of magical Britain, with the children of his former associates, if Snape was still loyal to Voldemort? He hadn't been surprised by Voldemort's continued existence. Dumbledore had spoken that night as if he had *expected* it.

Given the events of the past year, the danger to his brother, the danger to himself, Harry didn't have a high opinion of the headmaster, but Dumbledore was *Dumbledore*. He wouldn't let an agent of Voldemort around children. He'd have to be barking, actually down on all fours, foaming at the mouth, barking mad.

There was something more important than Dumbledore's questionable judgment. If it had been Harry in Snape's position, he would want to know. Even if he wanted nothing to do with the child, had no inclination to have children, he would rather know than live in ignorance.

One thing mattered most, though, and that was what decided Harry.

He wanted a dad.

Harry braced himself and knocked on the door.

"Come in," Snape called out. He sounded tired, and Harry almost changed his mind. He could wait until the summer, or maybe next year, or send an owl with the good news. *Congratulations, it's a boy!*

He opened the door.

"Mr. Evans, what could possibly be so important that you deprive me of an early release from my suffering?"

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He knew Snape wasn't really upset, and if he really minded being bothered he wouldn't have been in his office at all. He shut the door behind himself and walked further into the room.

"Is something the matter?" Snape asked. "I know Andromeda moved your appointment up to a sooner date, given recent events."

"No, it's not that," Harry said, looking up. He had to be brave. "There's something I need to ask you. And something I ought to tell you."

"Go on," Snape said, watching him with a curious expression.

Harry grimaced, then asked, “Do you regret it? Joining him?”

Snape’s expression was too complicated for him to read, then his face closed down. “Why are you asking me this?”

“It’s relevant,” Harry said. “Also, I...is it safe to speak freely here?”

Snape narrowed his eyes, then took out his wand and silently cast a few spells Harry didn’t recognize. “I take it this is something you don’t want to get to the headmaster?”

“No,” he said, relieved. “Definitely not. I wouldn’t even be talking about it, but I...I came across some information. In the library.”

Harry was glad he had the sense of mind to take a Calming Draught beforehand. He took another deep breath, then slowly said, “Did you know that Henry Samuel Evans lives at 13 Spinner’s Circle in Cokeworth?”

Severus stared at the boy, who had gone unnaturally pale but was standing firmly before him.

It took a moment for Severus to understand what the boy had said. Then the information slammed into him like a freight train. He couldn’t believe he had forgotten, that he had been so far gone he hadn’t *noticed* forgetting. How many times had he been to Lily’s home? How many times had Rose and Sam given him leftovers at the back door? How many times had Petunia screeched at them from her bedroom window?

Evans—*Harry*—was still waiting for a response.

Severus’ mind reeled with the implications. He knew Harry’s birthdate, he’d seen it plenty of times on his medical records, heard it when the boy had to recite it at his various appointments.

July 22nd, 1978.

Nearly nine months after a certain Halloween, relentlessly burned into his memory, in that special hell where all things Lily Evans dwelt.

Severus was still trying to comprehend *how* and *why*, when Harry decided to be the first to act. There was a vial in his hand, filled with some silvery substance, and he set it on Severus’ desk.

“It’s unicorn blood,” Harry said, as if this made any sense. “I’m...I’m sorry.”

Then the boy spun around and fled his office. The door slammed shut behind him.

Severus could only sit at his desk and stare at the place his son had been.

Prodigal Son

Chapter Summary

June 1992

Chapter Notes

The response last chapter was amazing! Thank you so much for your comments!

Harry ran.

He ran through the dungeons, through the entrance hall, out onto the grounds, and jumped into one of the waiting carriages. He clutched his chest, breathing heavily, then fumbled around his robes to make sure he still had everything. He didn't want to go back to the castle, he didn't want to see anyone, though he knew he would have to at some point. He'd promised his friends to ride with them back to Kings Cross. He would be missed if he holed himself up in a compartment alone, or used the floo at the Three Broomsticks and avoided the train completely.

Harry *knew* his dad knew. He saw the understanding, the disbelief, the shock. The silence. He couldn't handle it, standing there, waiting for *anything*. Well, if his dad wanted to pretend nothing had happened, that was perfectly fine. Absolutely splendid.

He curled up on the carriage's bench, willing it to finally start *moving* and take him away. He barely registered when other students entered, gave him strange looks, and resumed whatever conversation they were having. The thestrals pawed the ground, snorted, shrieked at each other, and the carriage began to move.

When they rumbled to a stop, Harry waited for the others to get out first, then he ducked his head down and hurried onto the train.

The best part of what he had told his dad was *how* Harry had done it. He didn't have to explicitly say *I'm your son*. His home address was under Fidelius. His dad couldn't tell anyone else, even if he wanted to.

Harry doubted he wanted to.

The door to his compartment slid open with a *bang*.

“I’ve been looking all over for you!” Astrid said. “Where’ve you been? Where’s your trunk?”

“In another compartment,” Harry said. When had he got here? The rest of his friends piled in, and Harry was drawn into a game of Exploding Snap. He singed his fingers a few times, but it kept his mind off what had happened.

It wasn’t as bad as Harry had feared. He had envisioned a number of outcomes. From the extremely unlikely—his dad crying, or hugging him, or *I always suspected*—to the slightly more likely—his dad yelling at him, *Never speak of this again*, or *You shouldn’t have told me*, throwing him out of his office, quitting his job and moving abroad. All told, stunned silence was the best Harry could hope for.

The Hogwarts Express moved at a snail’s pace. Harry had no idea *what* he would find at Kings Cross. He couldn’t afford to worry about what his dad would do in retaliation. Poison, perhaps. There were a lot of poisons.

No, his dad wouldn’t kill him, he was being ridiculous. But it was weird, wasn’t it? Harry was almost fourteen, there was only a month until his birthday. And he’d been living just down the road from his dad his entire life. Would his dad even want anything to do with him? What if he thought Harry had known the whole time? He’d have to explain himself better.

When the train finally, finally came to a stop, Harry was up in a heartbeat. Dwelling over what he had done or hadn’t done with regards to the whole dad thing was pointless. He had something else to do, something of greater importance.

He flinched when someone grabbed his arm.

“You’ve been weird this whole time,” Astrid muttered. He hadn’t realized everyone else had already got their trunks down and were leaving the compartment. “Are you really okay going back to...wherever you live?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, trying to get himself under control. He needed to be cool and collected for his next task of the day. “I’m nervous about meeting Cedric’s parents if I go say bye to him.”

Astrid nodded in understanding. “I should introduce you to my parents too. My mum’s probably here with my sister.”

“How old is she again?” Harry asked.

“Three,” Astrid said, smiling. “Come on.”

Harry followed Astrid onto the platform and the throngs of families and students, owls and cats. The Weasleys were immediately identifiable by the sheer quantity of them. Percy stood out like a beacon, taller than his father already. Harry wanted to look for Monty, who he was sure would be with Ron, but Astrid pulled him towards a woman who looked like an older, less rough version of Astrid holding a giggling little girl.

“Harry, this is my mum and my sister Mhairi. Mum, this is Harry.”

“Colleen,” Astrid’s mum said, using her free hand to shake Harry’s. He also shook her little sister’s hand, which was sticky. He discreetly wiped his hand off on his robes. “Astrid’s asked to have you round this summer. You’re more than welcome.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, glancing at Astrid. “I’ve got another train to catch, but owl me?”

“Yeah, sure,” Astrid said. “You just want to see *Cedric*.”

“Who’s Cedric?” Astrid’s mum asked. Harry narrowed his eyes at his *friend*, but she just smiled at him. “Is he that new Hufflepuff seeker you mentioned?”

Harry couldn’t deal with this betrayal. “I’ll talk to you later,” he said to Astrid pointedly. “It was nice meeting you, Mrs. Urquhart, Miss Mhairi.”

Mhairi gawked at him. “Mummy, mummy, that boy, he said...”

“I know, he called you miss! Isn’t that fancy?”

“Bye, Harry,” Astrid called out.

Harry waved at her, then looked around. He really had to find Monty, but the line leaving the platform was long so he knew he had time. The Weasleys were still there, and the old gate guard was only letting people out in twos and threes.

Someone caught his hand, and Harry had his wand halfway out before he realized it was Cedric. He looked at their joined hands and Cedric let go like he was holding a live viper. “My dad couldn’t make it,” Cedric said. “But my mum’s here, if you want to meet her?”

“Sure,” Harry said, feeling even more nervous than when he’d been introduced to Astrid’s mum.

Cedric led him to a friendly-looking woman who smiled warmly at Harry when he was introduced.

“Mum, this is my friend Harry,” Cedric said. “And this is my mum, Wenna Diggory.”

“Nice to meet you,” Harry said, shaking her hand. Cedric didn’t physically resemble his mother, as such, but Harry could tell where he’d got his personality.

“Cedric’s told me all about you,” she said, and Harry had an out-of-body experience.

“Has he?” he said faintly.

“Only good things!” Cedric said hurriedly. “I mean, there are *only* good things. Right mum?”

Cedric’s mum laughed lightly. “From what Cedric’s told me, you’ve been very helpful with his studies.”

“Harry’s top of the class this year too,” Cedric said proudly, making Harry blush.

“It’s not a big deal,” Harry said. “I should probably talk to my other friends.”

“We’ll see each other over the holiday, right?” Cedric asked ardently, his eyes sparkling.

“Yeah,” Harry said, glancing at Cedric’s mum, who was practically vibrating with excitement. “Owl me, okay?”

Harry made his escape. He didn’t think he could deal with anyone else’s parents that day, and yet it seemed everyone was determined to introduce him that year. Jasmine’s mother, Phoebe’s parents and grandmother, Terence’s parents and older sister, Adrian’s father, Cassius’ grandparents. Harry tried his best to remember all of their names. Charity seized him and carried him to her own family, including her great-grandmother who had been an internationally renowned gobstones player in her day.

Then the Weasleys’ started disappearing.

Harry broke away from the madness that had possessed his friends—did he *really* have to meet their families?—and cut into the line. He didn’t have a trunk with him, not that anyone could tell, so there weren’t many complaints. He was only a few people behind Monty and Ron. Both were too distracted by the numerous people calling out to Monty to notice him.

Then they were back in the muggle world. A red-haired girl—Ginevra Weasley, Percy’s only sister—pointed at Monty.

“There he is, mum! There he is, look! Monty Potter!”

Harry didn’t know how his brother put up with it. He hung back as Monty chatted with Mrs. Weasley, leaning against a wall as if waiting for a train. He looked like any other muggle teenager out of his school robes.

“You must be Monty’s family!”

Harry casually looked over and saw them. Vernon Dursley, obviously outraged at Monty for having the audacity to exist. Petunia Dursley and their cousin Dudley, both looking scared out of their wits. Harry was dismayed to see Monty was returning to their home. His dad had said he’d talk to the headmaster about it, though why the headmaster had any power over Monty’s living situation was beyond Harry.

It was hard to conceive of the Dursleys as *his* family, given he’d never met any of them and they didn’t know he existed. And he wouldn’t *want* to be family to people who mistreated his brother. Thinking about that made Harry think about how his dad had treated Monty. Could that change?

He watched his brother’s trunk get shoved roughly into the boot of the Dursleys’ car, then watched the car drive away. It took some time for the Hogwarts students to clear off, but eventually it was just Harry and a bunch of muggles. Harry walked out of the station, unhappy with his brother’s living situation but limited in what he could do.

Kidnapping Monty was off the table. Harry had puzzled over *why* his brother had been left with their muggle relatives, people who could not protect him from magical threats. It wasn't hard by any means to find out their names—Monty himself had talked about *the Dursleys*—nor would it be hard for anyone passingly familiar with the muggle world to pick up a telephone book, or simply follow them home. Not only that, but there had been Monty Potter-sightings over the years, witches and wizards who ran into him in public, some interviews published in the *Daily Prophet*.

Harry doubted whoever put Monty with the Dursleys—and he had a pretty good idea of who that had been—had left him there unprotected. Which meant there had to be some spell or spells keeping Monty safe. Not the Fidelius, that wouldn't have gone over well with the muggles, especially blatantly magic-hating ones like the Dursleys. Harry didn't know enough about magic to know exactly what kind of spells, though. Spells that would prevent Monty from being removed from the home? Spells that would compel him to stay? Maybe his dad would know.

Those considerations were, of course, without Monty's input on the matter. He was plainly unhappy with the Dursleys, but would he *want* to live with Harry? An older Slytherin he'd only spoken to a few times? Or would someone from Gryffindor, Hermione, or more likely Ron and the Weasleys—a great band name, Harry thought—be preferable? Harry knew from Percy's stories about his family and the Burrow that they would welcome Monty with open arms and treat him as one of their own. Harry could barely feed himself, and half of his food was stolen. He'd have to get a summer job at one of the factories, or a pub, under the table. If his plan didn't work out.

Harry paused just outside of the Leaky Cauldron, patting his pockets. Satisfied, he opened the door. The pub was dimly lit, smokey, and busy as people were coming in after work for a drink or a meal. The entrance to Diagon Alley was kept open due to the number of people going in and out, and Harry easily melted into the crowd. He ducked into an alley. Unlike a muggle alley, there weren't bins or boxes waiting to be broken down. Witches and wizards had no need for them, which made Harry's life a little more difficult. Not impossible, just annoying.

Extension charms were a nightmare. Harry was honestly surprised at getting straight Os that year given how much time he'd spent on spells far above his current ability. But he needed them. The bag he had charmed before Christmas hadn't held, the spell wearing out after a few weeks. It would have been better to buy one made by a skilled enchanter, but Harry couldn't afford it. Yet.

He pulled a small pouch out of his pocket, and from inside it he pulled out an old cloak of his mum's. It was heavy wool, originally forest green but recently charmed black, a winter cloak with a deep hood. Harry threw the cloak over himself, smiling as the cooling charms his mum had imbued the cloak with came to life.

The books Percy had got him from the Restricted Section had been incredibly useful. Frankie was a very, *very* bright yellow and stood out even in a place as vibrant as Diagon Alley. The babelfish also made Harry easily recognizable. He got his wand out and watched her do a few laps above his head.

“It would be helpful if you stopped swimming for a moment,” he said. “*Oculi solum.*”

Harry didn’t notice anything different, but that was in the nature of the spell. He put his wand away and resisted the urge to check his pockets again, not wanting to give away the location of his other belongings, then made his way into Knockturn Alley.

After some walking, he encountered his first hag. She grabbed him and dragged him into a shadowy alcove.

“You smell like *blood*,” she hissed through rotted teeth.

Harry wrinkled his nose. He wasn’t going to tell the lady what *she* smelled like, it wouldn’t do him any favors. Instead, he reached into a pocket and removed a leaf with a single, shimmering drop of silver blood on it.

The hag’s rheumy eyes went wide, and her clawed fingers began to twitch.

“Ten galleons a drop,” Harry said, pulling the leaf back before the hag could grab it.

“I think that’s a bit rich for her blood,” someone said. They had a silky voice, seductive, dark. The hag scowled at the newcomer and scurried off. Harry looked over and saw possibly the best, and worst, thing for him to encounter.

A vampire.

This particular vampire was rather androgynous. Black hair slicked back, dark eyes, skin leached of all color, a suit in good repair.

“Are you interested?” Harry asked, tucking the leaf away.

“That depends, little wizard,” the vampire said, moving closer to him, sniffing. “Not so naive, I see.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “It wasn’t forcibly taken, if that’s your concern. The unicorn was injured by something else.”

“I see,” the vampire purred.

“Did you want to test it?” Harry asked.

“No, I can sense the *purity* from here,” the vampire said. “Unicorns are creatures of light and innocence, inimical to ones such as myself. Creatures of the dark, of night and the deepest shadows. We are already cursed to a half-life. There is little to gain or lose in killing a unicorn. But you have already thought of this, haven’t you, little wizard?”

“I don’t really have time for this,” Harry said. The sun was starting to set, and he still had to catch his train home.

“Ten galleons, you say?” the vampire asked.

“And I’ve got more.”

“You could ask fifty galleons.”

Harry shrugged.

The vampire sighed wearily. “Very well.”

They made their exchange, the vampire wrinkling their nose daintily at the smell of garlic coming from one of Harry’s pockets. To Harry’s surprise, the vampire licked the drop of unicorn blood off the leaf right in front of him. Their eyes flashed silver, and their face became almost angelic, their expression one of euphoria.

“I haven’t felt like this in *centuries*,” the vampire said. “I suppose I shall see if it is worth the cost. How much more do you have?”

“I’ve got nineteen more drops on me,” Harry said.

The vampire tilted their head. “I shall return momentarily.” Then they turned into a bat and flew away.

Harry thought it was pretty cool, but he wasn’t thrilled about waiting. The vampire might not even come back. Just as Harry decided to leave and find someone else to deal with, the vampire returned with a pouch of gold. Harry had assumed that, given their longevity, vampires would have a better time accumulating wealth than people like werewolves, who often had short and hard lives.

The leaves were strung on thread *borrowed* from Jasmine, and Harry handed the macabre garland over.

“Run along, little wizard,” the vampire said, “lest my brethren catch you unawares.”

Their exchange hadn’t gone unnoticed. There were plenty of people in Knockturn Alley with enhanced senses, people who could smell a single drop of unicorn blood. The rest was shrunk along with his trunk, coated in spells to keep it all unobservable. Harry hadn’t needed a fortune. He understood the basics of drug dealing, and knew he would need better, more reliable connections to sell something like an entire vial. But he now had enough to buy what he had in mind, something he hoped hadn’t been sold while he was at school.

Borgin and Burkes was one of the better known establishments of Knockturn Alley, given its large storefront and proximity to Diagon Alley. Harry had never bothered going in, but the displays were eye catching. Artifacts, cursed objects, things with no discernable purpose. He was relieved to see the item he wanted still on display. Most people with a wand would have little use for such a device. An underage witch or wizard, however...

The bell clanged as Harry pushed the door open. An old man at the counter, who looked like he could be related to Eliza, scowled at Harry.

“This ain’t a place for brats,” the old man said. “Get out.”

“I’ve got gold,” Harry said, walking to the display he saw. “And something more interesting, maybe.”

Harry hovered his fingers over the penknife. It looked like a Swiss Army knife, a multi-tool with various attachments. The little card next to it promised the attachments could be used to open any lock or untie any knot. It was perfect for someone who had been locked up by their muggle relatives, and could be again.

Harry picked it up, glad it didn’t take off his fingers or immediately curse him. Borgin and Burkes wouldn’t have been in business for so long if they weren’t at least mostly honest about their wares.

“A hundred galleons,” the old man said, grinning toothily at him.

“I know,” Harry said, digging the coins out. It was the most money he’d ever handled in his life, and he hoped the vampire hadn’t fucked him over with leprechaun gold. He stacked a hundred coins on the counter and reached for the penknife. The old man grabbed his wrist.

Harry looked up at him. “What?”

The old man peered into his face. “Nothing, brat. You looked like...Get out of here.”

Harry grabbed the penknife and left the store, wondering what had just happened. He checked his watch, then increased his pace. There was still time to catch the train, but he’d probably have to walk from the station to Cokeworth.

The cloak stuffed away again, Harry found a cafe at the train station. He got coffee and a stale pastry and picked a free table in a quiet corner. He wasn’t hungry, but he was feeling very tired and he knew he had another long train ride ahead of him.

He sat with his back to the rest of the cafe and pulled Benjy out of his hoodie pocket. The little thestral had been sleeping, and flapped his wings irritably. Harry also took out a piece of string, a pen—he wasn’t going to use a *quill* in muggle London—and parchment. He wrote a quick note explaining what the penknife did, used the parchment to wrap it up, then tied it to Benjy’s back.

“I need you to carry this to my brother,” Harry said quietly.

Benjy shrieked in acknowledgement and flapped his wings, landing on top of Harry’s head. Harry finished his food and stood up, carrying Benjy outside, where he took off into the night. Harry had tested the little thestral a few times, carrying notes to his friends, and Benjy always found them. Harry had no idea where in England his brother lived, but he was confident Benjy could find him.

Harry looked at the sky for a few moments, checked his watch, panicked, and ran for his train.

Severus sat at the kitchen table, a cup of tea gone cold in front of him. He didn't know how many times he had reheated it. He no longer cared to.

By the time he had come to his senses, the train had already left and he was summoned to the end-of-year meeting with the rest of the staff. They discussed fifth-year prefects for the next school year, students who had nearly failed their exams but would nevertheless be joining their peers instead of being held back, and, of course, Monty Potter. His professors had nothing but praise for the boy, matching what Dumbledore had told him. *Modest, likable, and reasonably talented.*

"And you, Severus?" the headmaster had asked, looking over his half-moon glasses. "What is your opinion of Monty?"

Severus resisted the impulse to spit invectives about the boy. He recalled a conversation with Harry, something he had at the time attributed to his association with Cedric Diggory, a boy he had until *very* recently been rather indifferent to. Now, now that he knew—should he do a paternity test? No, it would be an insult to them all, Lily included, he *knew*—Monty Potter wasn't *just* the son of Lily Evans and James Potter. No, he was Harry's brother. And *that* reframed the entire year. What did Harry think of how his father had treated his brother?

"His association with Granger has resulted in some small improvements in brewing," Severus said, each word like pulling a tooth. "The Forgetfulness Potion he brewed for his exam was adequate."

A new realization made his eye twitch, which he hoped his colleagues would read as reluctance to say anything positive about Potter. Harry knew what potion was on the first year exam. What were the chances he had told Potter?

The meeting ended with Dumbledore unsurprisingly *not* telling the staff about the Dark Lord riding around on the back of Quirrell's head. The headmaster played his cards close to the chest. Severus was struck again with a horrific thought. It hadn't been merely a student of his fighting off an agent of the Dark Lord. No, that was his *son* that miserable fuckwit tried to kill!

Once dismissed, Severus stormed through the castle, seething. There was work he had to do. Supplies inventorying, hospital wing restocking, packing up. He threw floo powder at the fire in his office and stepped into Spinner's End. Accosting Harry at Kings Cross wouldn't do. No, the boy had run off at Severus' complete lack of response, and he was adept at navigating the muggle world. It would be easy for Harry to lose himself in London.

So there he was, waiting in a kitchen and having a great deal of sympathy for what he'd put his mother through when he'd come home late. Or not at all, which was becoming increasingly the case for Harry as the hour grew later. He probably wasn't used to *anyone* expecting him home. His son was frightfully independent, and what right did Severus have to start imposing rules and expectations outside of his role as a professor? In a few short years Harry would legally be an adult. Did he even *want* a father? It was never something Severus had wanted, nor expected to happen for him. Was that why Lily—

He heard the front door open and close, shoes being kicked off, the tread of socked feet. Severus leaned back and crossed his arms, watching the doorway. Harry's head was down when he came into sight, nearly drowning in the hooded jumper he wore.

"Do you usually come home this late?" Severus asked.

Harry jumped and stared at him with wide eyes. He looked exhausted, though unsurprised to find Severus lying in wait.

"Sometimes," Harry said. "Or later."

Severus was perfectly aware he was in Harry's own home, and that it was perhaps presumptuous to invite the boy to sit at his own kitchen table, but he did just that. He had no idea how to navigate this situation, but he *had* been a professor for over a decade. When he first started he was barely older than the seventh-years he taught. He could deal with an almost fourteen-year-old.

"We need to have a discussion," Severus said, reheating the tea in the pot. It would be bitter, but he was used to worse, and Harry was likely used to nothing at all. Except whatever he managed to steal. If he had *known* his son wouldn't have had to steal!

"You left rather quickly," Severus said, watching Harry. Harry was staring into his tea.

"I had a train to catch," Harry said blankly.

"Be that as it may, I find myself with a number of questions."

Harry bit his lip, and now that Severus knew to look for it, he recognized it as one of Lily's expressions. She did it when she was hesitant to say something, either genuinely or as part of an act.

"I thought I should give you some space," Harry finally said. "I didn't want to bother you."

"It wasn't a bother," Severus said, keeping his voice neutral. "You aren't a bother."

Harry shook his head, and Severus could only guess what the boy was thinking. It was true he had a number of medical conditions, but they were all well-managed and were more burdensome to *Harry* than those around him. Did he believe Severus would resent having a child?

He *had* been something of an emotional mess all day. He was shocked, then angry his son had been kept from him, afraid of doing something wrong, sick at the thought of becoming like his own father, regretful he had been so thoroughly excised from Lily's life she would keep something so monumental from him, the guilt of choices he made when he was young, angry, stupid, desperate. Did she think a child wouldn't have changed his mind?

Severus was forced to admit that, perhaps, it wouldn't have.

Harry was looking at him, waiting. Severus didn't care much what people thought of him, not after all the losses he had suffered. It was so trivial in comparison. But he found that he *did*

care what Harry thought about him.

“Explain to me how you came to your conclusion,” Severus said. “And drink your tea.”

“What’s in it?” Harry asked.

“It’s only tea,” Severus said honestly.

Harry took a sip and grimaced. “I should have stopped for milk.”

“Harry,” Severus said.

Harry sighed and set his tea down. “I always knew who my mum was,” he said. “I don’t really remember her, though. She left me with gran not long after I was born...”

Severus listened as his son explained his life growing up. The death of his grandfather Sam in a factory explosion—Death Eater attack—his grandmother Rose’s lung cancer and eventually death when Harry was eight. Severus had thought Rose had also been killed, as many families of muggleborns had been. But Lily was too smart, too gifted with charms. She had placed both of her children under Fidelius. She had trusted her eldest with her mother, trusted her magic to keep Harry unknown to the world, and the magic still held even with only an eight-year-old to maintain it. A heavy burden, for a child.

Harry left the room and came back with a letter in Lily’s handwriting. Severus read the letter she had written to her son. *Their* son. Shortly after the prophecy was made, before they went into hiding. Severus had avoided thinking about that, the one reason above all why he didn’t *deserve* to be Harry’s father, to have any say over how his son lived his life.

It was his fault Lily was dead.

Severus gave Harry his letter back, and the boy handled it as delicately as a butterfly’s wing.

“I didn’t intend to find out who she meant,” Harry said. “I think gran must’ve known.”

Severus nodded. He could see the similarities between them, though Harry’s resemblance to Severus’ own mother was stronger. And to Lily.

“Charity found a picture of Eileen Prince and put it up in our practice room,” Harry said. “And she said we sort of look alike.”

“You do,” Severus said quietly.

Harry’s mouth twitched. “So I started looking through old *Daily Prophets*. I eventually found a marriage announcement. And...a birth announcement.”

“When?”

Harry looked to the side. “The end of April. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I was...”

Harry trailed off, picking up his tea again.

“I do regret it,” Severus said.

Harry’s head snapped up.

“Serving the Dark Lord.”

Harry stared at him. In disbelief? Hope? Severus knew it was ridiculously late, Harry hadn’t arrived until well after midnight. He needed to sleep. But Harry nodded, and then he smiled.

“Okay,” Harry said. As if it were that simple.

Severus never thought he could be capable of an emotion like *love* again. Not after his mother’s death, certainly not after Lily’s. He had buried his heart with her.

And yet here he was, sitting at an old kitchen table with *his son*, completely thrown by the easy acceptance of a child. It was so unexpected, so surreal, how instantly Severus had redefined himself around Harry’s existence, how immediate and unconditional it was. Severus already found Harry more tolerable than other students, was perhaps even *fond* of the boy, but Harry was *his son*. Wasn’t that astonishing?

He watched Harry shuffle off to bed, the unspoken trust in allowing Severus into his home, his sanctuary, into his life. It was too much.

Severus quietly cleaned up the kitchen and made his way back to Spinner’s End. He had no idea what things would look like moving forward. He was a father now. What did Harry want from him? What did he need? Where did he even start? God help him, he was a *father*.

Severus paused once he reached the main road, looked back to the house only he and his son could see.

Help me protect Lily’s son.

Maybe he could finally stop wishing he was dead.

Coffee Talk

Chapter Summary

Early summer 1992

Harry woke up with a little thestral nibbling on his hair, an owl pecking at his window, and in a state of total confusion. He knew he had gone to bed late, and as the world reasserted itself, Harry recalled with a sinking sense of dread the conversation he'd had with his dad.

He jumped out of bed and flung open his window, sneezing as a year of dust was dislodged. He really needed to clean.

The owl swooped in and stuck her leg out imperiously. It wasn't an owl Harry recognized, but he untied the scroll from her leg, apologized profusely for being such a poor host, and the owl flapped away.

Harry rubbed the last traces of sleep from his eyes and opened the scroll. He stuck his head out of the window and squinted at where the sun struggled to break through the clouds.

His dad had requested his presence for lunch.

Harry tossed the scroll aside and dug around the clothes discarded on the floor. He pulled out a tiny trunk and felt a flash of annoyance. They'd spent hours talking, and Harry hadn't remembered to unshrink his things while an adult wizard was around. Bloody Trace.

Pulling on his clothes from the previous day, Harry stuck the tiny trunk back in his pocket, scooped up Benjy, and started for Spinner's End.

It was strange being back in Cokeworth. There had been a lot of changes over the past year. Buildings torn down, new ones in the process of being built, businesses shuttered, houses boarded up. Harry had hardly thought of the friends he'd made over the previous summer, and wondered if any of them were still around. He knew the older he grew, the less he would have in common with his muggle peers. There was an entire world hidden from them, a world in which they didn't belong. Muggles and magic used to live side by side, hand in hand. Then there were the witch hunts, the witch burnings—always the witches first, though plenty of men had been accused of witchcraft and consigned to the flames. The true tragedy of that time was how many muggles had burned, how many muggleborn children had been drowned.

Harry stuck his hands in his hoodie pocket as he walked. He didn't see anyone out. It was Sunday. People were at church or hiding in their homes, or maybe had fled for the weekend. The holiday for the local state school didn't start until late July.

Cokeworth was dead.

Harry walked down the road to his dad's house, weaving past tipped over bins and wondering if he was allowed to call Snape *dad*. He didn't know if he could say it to the man's face, not yet. They'd known each other for several years, and while Harry couldn't claim to *know* Snape, he certainly knew more about him than his other professors.

He came to a stop at the gate, one hand on the latch. Harry worked up the nerve to open it, and the hinges gave an embarrassing *squeal* which he was certain everyone in the neighborhood heard.

Sick with trepidation, Harry walked up the cracked steps and knocked on the door.

It opened between knocks, and Harry hastily pulled his hand back.

Severus Snape was *tall*. Harry knew because of his *condition* that he might never be very tall; medical treatment could only do so much to change his body. It was frustrating, but not something he had control over. He did wonder if he would ever manage to have the same presence as his dad. Intimidating, confident, self-assured. His dad acted like the world owed him something, and was perpetually disappointed in its failure to meet his expectations.

He also looked very tired. Harry was surprised to see his dad's hair pulled back, instead of hanging around his face. It made him look younger, as did his conflicted expression.

"You're late," his dad said.

Harry looked down. "Sorry, sir."

"It is of no matter," his dad said, stepping back to allow him in. "Yesterday was a...trying day, for both of us."

Harry followed his dad into the kitchen, more cramped and worn down than the one in his own home. He knew that Spinner's End was the poor side of town. Given that the entire town was poor, this stratification was notable. He wondered if his dad had grown up in this house. What other reason would there be for him living in it?

It was a simple meal. Bread, cheese, apples, cold meats. Harry sat down and, at a gesture from his dad, began serving himself.

"Now that I have been made aware of them, it is clear I have been remiss in some of my duties," his dad said, pouring tea for both of them. "I shall endeavor to remedy them. To begin with, I will ensure you get regular meals. You needn't scavenge from bins like a fox."

Harry stopped spreading pickle over his bread. "You knew about that?"

His dad sighed. "It was an educated guess. I..." His dad gritted his teeth together. "I myself have a similar experience. My parents were quite impoverished."

"Is this their house?" Harry asked. He had so many questions, but he was worried about upsetting his dad with them.

“Yes,” his dad said in a way that signified finality.

“Will you tell me about them?” Harry asked. “One day?”

His dad closed his eyes. “One day. There are more pressing matters at hand.”

Harry nodded, and took a bite of his food. Had his dad done the shopping? Is that why he hadn’t slept? The thought made him shift uncomfortably. He hadn’t had any type of domesticity since his gran had died. He had tried to maintain their routines. Shopping, cooking, doing the washing. When the power and water had been cut off, it got harder. But it hadn’t been *that* long since people, since *muggles*, began living with electricity and indoor plumbing. They’d gone without for millenia. He had magic to start fires, and a well pump to get water. He survived.

“You don’t have to spend any money on me,” Harry said. “I mean, I can work. And I have money. I can pay for myself.”

His dad gave him a flat look. “The very *least* a parent should do is ensure their child is fed, clothed, and sheltered. My salary is more than sufficient to provide these basic necessities. I am perfectly aware you are capable of looking after yourself, but you no longer need to. Moreover, I...would prefer to know you are adequately cared for.” His dad closed his eyes, then said, “Please, allow me to do this.”

Harry felt put on the spot. Was his dad feeling guilty? It wasn’t *his* fault. It wasn’t anyone’s, except Voldemort’s.

“I still have money left over from school,” he said. “And I got some more yesterday.”

His dad raised an eyebrow. “Where *were* you yesterday?”

Harry pushed his food around. “Knockturn Alley.”

The temperature in the room dropped.

“And *what*, pray tell, were you doing in Knockturn Alley?”

Harry glanced at his dad, and saw his eyes widen.

“The unicorn blood,” his dad said. “Your...offering. You had more of it?”

Harry nodded, not very hungry anymore. “During my detention with Hagrid. The unicorn had lost a lot of blood. I thought, I don’t know, maybe you could experiment with it? I know there’s a lot of uses for dragon blood...”

He looked up again, wondering if this was going to be their first fight. What a terrible start. His dad was visibly trying to get his emotions under control.

“It is not an unreasonable line of thinking,” his dad finally said. “What little literature there is on unicorn blood speaks of its healing properties. It’s *dark* healing properties, and such things

always have a consequence. I am unsure what significance there is in blood gathered from a unicorn one has not themselves harmed.”

“I know,” Harry said quietly.

“I assume you sold some?”

Harry nodded. “To a vampire.”

His dad snorted, surprising him. “My son, dealing unicorn blood to vampires in Knockturn Alley. What has the world come to?”

“Are you angry?” Harry asked.

“That is a good question,” his dad said. “Should I be? I imagine you didn’t know how I would ultimately react, and were making arrangements to support yourself during the holiday. You aren’t the only student to have ventured into Knockturn Alley to earn some coin. Plenty of family heirlooms have ended up there. It *is* notable that it was unicorn blood. Trading in unicorn parts is generally frowned upon, though your criminal endeavors pale in comparison to my own. Can I judge you for doing such a thing out of necessity? It was foolish, dealing with vampires often is, both due to your age, your inexperience, the questionable location, the danger to your person... I hope you exercised some discretion, though as an accomplished shoplifter I’m sure you did.”

Harry was flabbergasted. He had heard his dad rant plenty of times, to someone messing up in potions, or some rulebreaker in the corridors. He never thought his dad was *in general* prone to rambling.

He also wasn’t sure if he was being chastised or praised. Both?

“So, you’re *not* angry?” he asked.

“I’m more exasperated than anything,” his dad said, smiling faintly. “In the future, if you need money, or come into some contraband you’d like to peddle, speak with me first. I am more familiar with such matters, and am better equipped to protect myself. Most creature parts exist in a legal grey area. Unless it risks our exposure to muggles, such as domestic dragon breeding, the Ministry prefers to turn a blind eye. There were several dead unicorns discovered in the Forbidden Forest this year. As you may have noticed, no Ministry official came to investigate. In fact, the only one who seemed to care was Hagrid.”

Harry thought this over as he returned to his food. Why *hadn’t* anyone except Hagrid bothered looking into unicorns getting killed? Getting killed was the sort of thing that simply didn’t happen to unicorns. They didn’t have any predators, and most things were too intelligent to *want* to hunt unicorns. Unicorns were smart, fast, and dangerous. Smart enough to lure a threat away from a school full of children, even while bleeding to death. It was obvious whatever had been killing the unicorns was extremely dangerous, and they’d sent a man forbidden to use magic and a third-year out to investigate.

“The Ministry’s incompetent,” Harry said. “So’s the headmaster.”

His dad raised an eyebrow. “The headmaster is many things, but incompetent is not one of them. Speaking of which, he asked me to keep an eye on you.”

Harry pulled back. That was... “Why?”

“Your proximity to a certain first-year, I imagine,” his dad said, watching him carefully.

“But, he’s my—”

“He’s *nothing* to you,” his dad said firmly. “He *cannot* be anything. You have already drawn interest, for both your academic prowess and your actions against the Dark Lord, intentional or not. There are certain things which I am not at liberty to discuss, but suffice to say whatever happened to that boy that night could have just as easily happened to *you*, and it relates to who your mother is. It would be equally unwise should our association be made known.”

Harry braced himself against the table. “I know that. Gran told me it was dangerous, even if she didn’t really know *why*. I know there are people still loyal to *him*, like Quirrell, who wouldn’t hesitate to kill my...to kill *him*. And Quirrell tried to, he tried...”

His dad jumped up, hurrying around the table, pressing a vial to Harry’s lips. It was Calming Draught. He hadn’t even noticed he was shaking until it stopped.

“Your appointment is scheduled for next week,” his dad said. “I will be taking you.”

“I’m going to have to live with this the rest of my life,” Harry said, accepting the tea being handed to him. He was starting to hate the taste of mint.

“I know,” his dad said, hovering over him, his face pinched in concern. “I’m sorry, Harry.”

“Not your fault,” Harry said. “It’s no one’s fault. It just is.”

His dad sat back down. “I believe Quirrell’s...grudge...against you was of a more personal nature.”

“Hagrid shot him with a crossbow,” Harry said, smiling a little. “Git.”

“I never thought I would envy Hagrid, and yet here we are,” his dad said. “Speaking of, I take it you sold the rest of the blood you collected?”

Harry took another sip of his tea. “Not exactly.”

They fell into a routine reminiscent of summers past. Harry would join his dad for meals, help in the garden and greenhouse, help with his potions brewing. He’d practice skateboard tricks in the narrow breezeway, picking at the peeling griptape and frowning at the thinning

wheels. The rest of the unicorn blood had been confiscated, and he had no idea what his dad planned on doing with it, if anything. There had been an article in the *Daily Prophet* about a sudden drop in the vampire population, a day after vampires had been seen walking in broad daylight, unharmed by the sun. His dad had stared at him for a long time after he'd read the article.

"That's one known use for unicorn blood," Harry had said. His dad just shook his head and turned the page.

When the time for his appointment came, his dad took him to St. Mungo's. It was worse than Harry remembered, the pain of having part of his body transfigured. The adrenal glands weren't even that big; Andromeda had conjured a model of a kidney for him to look at, the gland sitting on top like a jaunty tricorne hat. It was barely bigger than a galleon, but Andromeda's spell made his whole body ache. It made him cry just like the first time, he had no control over it. His body simply *reacted* to the pain. Andromeda explained that crying helped reduce stress, which offset his newly functioning adrenal glands. So went her theory. She gave him a hug, which was nice. He knew his dad could tell he had been crying, he'd probably *heard* it, and he gave Harry a pat on his shoulder.

It was awkward, but also nice. Harry wondered when the last time his dad had hugged anyone was. He didn't seem cursed with overly affectionate friends like Harry was. Harry wasn't even sure his dad *liked* being touched, in any capacity. His modest clothes and distant bearing certainly suggested he preferred to keep the world at a remove. Harry could relate, especially after he had begun *developing*. He kept his chest bound, but nevertheless preferred form-obscuring clothing.

Thoughts of his brother always lingered at the back of Harry's mind. Benjy's return, and the absence of the penknife, suggested the delivery had been successful. Harry hoped his brother was smart enough for it to not be taken away from him, and to keep it with him at all times. Harry wanted to ask his dad about checking in on his brother, but he obviously wasn't keen on the subject of Monty Potter.

Harry wished he knew *why*. His brother was just a kid, he hadn't done anything to anyone.

Still, Harry didn't want to push. He did talk with his dad while they worked on potions together, and over meals. His dad wanted to know *everything* about him. It felt a little like being interrogated, but Harry was allowed to ask questions too. And his dad would mostly answer them, even if reluctantly. Harry gathered that his dad's childhood had been...bad. He wouldn't tell Harry any details, though, just that his paternal grandparents were long dead.

He was questioned about his friends, too. Astrid, who was probably his best friend. Phoebe and her theatrics. Jasmine and her passion for crafting. Dignified Cassius, crass Adrian, quidditch-obsessed Terence, who gave Astrid a run for her money.

Harry didn't have many friends or acquaintances outside of Slytherin. There was Percy, but he was a Gryffindor and his dad had some weird dislike for all things Gryffindor and, specifically, Weasley.

And there was Cedric.

During previous summers, Harry had received few letters. Sending owls, or other birds, internationally wasn't often done, as the journeys were long and potentially fatal. There were other options. Owl post relay, sending letters via floo, using muggle means of communication. His friends were unfamiliar with the last, though, and it wasn't as if Harry had a telephone they could call if they were. So, it came as a surprise when, one morning at breakfast, he got three owls.

"Popular this morning," his dad said, wandlessly stirring his coffee. Harry had coffee as well, as his dad said it interacted well with the potion he had developed.

Harry looked at his letters. One was from Astrid, one from Percy, and one from Cedric.

He opened the one from Astrid first.

"She asked me to visit her in Aberdeen," Harry said. "She wants to go to the beach. She says it's *not that bad* this time of year." He looked up at his dad. "I've never been swimming before. And...what would I even wear?"

His dad pursed his lips. "It's the North Sea, so it's very cold. Creatures like kraken and sea serpents dwell in deeper waters. There are selkie who hide among the seal colonies, they tend to keep to themselves. Finfolk wouldn't bother with a crowded beach, they prefer isolated victims. As for swimming, while I'd advise against it based on temperature alone, not to mention your lack of experience, I'm sure Miss Urquhart's parents are competent enough to protect you. In terms of swimwear, you could always wear a shirt."

Harry looked at Astrid's letter again. "I think I'd have to buy clothes."

"I've been waiting for you to ask," his dad said, and Harry hid behind his letter, abashed. "You *do* dress like a ragamuffin, which may be excused to a certain extent. It's best if we aren't seen together in wizarding shopping areas, but we can go up to Manchester today, if you'd like."

"Thank you," Harry said quietly, folding Astrid's letter up. "I'll have to send her a reply."

"You may use Iseult," his dad said, nodding at the long-eared owl sitting imperiously on her perch. She gazed at Harry with fierce orange eyes, then turned away.

"I'm sure Benjy can manage," Harry said airily, drawing an angry snap from Iseult. Harry ignored her and looked at his two other letters, wondering which to open first. He went with Cedric's, as he rightfully guessed he was writing to ask Harry to hang out sometime.

"Cedric's invited me to a quidditch game," Harry said. "He says his dad's got tickets. It's the Chudley Cannons and the Banchory Bangers. Oh, god."

His dad raised an eyebrow.

Harry sighed and explained. “They’re the two worst teams in the league. I only know because Astrid’s favorite team is the Bangers. They were banned from the league for over a century for trying to capture a Hebridean Black to be their mascot. Their team crest’s got a sausage on it.”

“Lovely,” his dad said.

“I’m guessing Ced’s a fan of the Cannons,” Harry said. “He wants to go around Diagon Alley first.

“And you?” his dad asked. “Do you have a...favorite...team?”

Harry rolled his eyes. His dad had his own brand of melodrama. “No, I’m not a fan of quidditch. I’ll watch my friends play, like they’ll come to my gobstones games.” It went without saying he’d go to all of his brother’s games too.

“I see,” his dad said.

“I do have a question,” Harry said, feeling a little nervous. There really wasn’t anyone else he would be comfortable asking, and even asking his dad—the concept of which he was still adjusting to—was embarrassing. “How do people, magical people, I mean, feel about...gay stuff?”

“If you’re asking what *I* think,” his dad said, “I find it wholly unremarkable. As for how wizarding culture feels, it varies. Muggleborns may bring prejudice from the muggle world with them. Pureblood families in general disdain any relationship which fails to be *productive*. There are, however, no laws against it as in the muggle world. In the past I believe such couples often adopted, or kidnapped, muggleborns from their families. Muggles have tales about *changelings*, which can be attributed to young children having bouts of accidental magic. These children were removed before they could be killed by their own families, when possible.”

“So,” Harry said, “you’re fine with...I mean, if...”

His dad sighed. “Any issue I may have with Mr. Diggory has nothing to do with his gender.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, but it seemed that was his dad’s final say on the matter. “I wonder if Astrid’s going to the game too? I guess I’ll ask her about it.”

His last letter was from Percy. He *had* said he’d owl Harry his OWL results, which was all Harry was really expecting. A slip of paper with an O on it. But Percy’s owl Hermes was waiting around for a reply, and Harry pulled an entire sheaf of parchment from the envelope.

“How did it even all fit?” he said to himself, looking into the envelope. “He must’ve had his mum spell it for him.”

His dad gave the stack of parchment an unimpressed look.

“I helped someone study for Muggle Studies,” Harry said, looking at the first page. “They’ve sent me a copy of their OWLs...”

Harry goggled at Percy's results. "They've got an O-star. *And* one in History of Magic?" It made sense, given Percy was headed for a Ministry career. "Christ on a *stick*, he's got straight Os."

"He?" his dad asked.

"They," Harry said quickly. "I definitely said *they*."

Harry studiously ignored whatever face his dad was making and read the essay Percy had written him. His OWL results had, unsurprisingly, earned him a summer internship at the Ministry, working in the same department as Mr. Weasley. He was *not at liberty* to discuss what happened in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, but had explained in exhaustive detail what a day in the department was like. Harry found himself smiling at Percy's frustration with the department's disorganization. Instead of consolidating their laws and policies into a comprehensive code, they'd just kept tacking on new ones as muggle technology advanced. It was, according to Percy, mayhem, and he was the only one to see it.

"Interesting," his dad said, startling Harry. "You may wish to avoid using certain vulgarities in...mixed company."

Harry nodded, hastily putting Percy's letter back into its envelope. "So, uh, Manchester?"

Summer Triathlon

Chapter Summary

July 1992

Harry had never been in such a large department store, and it was clear his dad hadn't either.

"I hate this," he immediately decided.

"Let us make this as quick as possible," his dad said. "We simply must endure."

Harry marched to the escalator, not sure if he was supposed to go to the boy's section or the men's section. His dad followed, sneering at the moving stairs.

"It is not dissimilar to the headmaster's office," his dad said, gripping the handrail.

"We could just go back," Harry said. "Transfigure something."

"Would you care to remind me what you were previously doing to garb yourself, Harry?"

Harry shook his head, flushing in embarrassment. His dad had not so subtly called Harry's home a mausoleum. Harry wore the clothes his dead family had left behind. A lot of it had been handmade by his grandmother, and some by his aunt. His mum had never cared for sewing, but Harry had learned. He had to, in order to fix holes and try to make things fit better. He didn't mind it, but he understood how it might sound to other people.

"Point taken," he said, stepping off of the escalator. He was confronted with a sea of racks. "I don't even know where to start."

He looked up at his dad, who was as implacable as always. It was strange seeing him in muggle clothes, which he *knew* his dad had transfigured. A black suit, predictably. Better than Harry's rolled up trousers and baggy jumper.

"Check the labels for the material," his dad said as they braved the rows of clothing. "Do *not* get any polyester. I do not care to relive the seventies."

"Come on in, the water's fine!"

“You’re absolutely mad,” Harry said, watching as Astrid flung herself into a wave. The water was steel grey, reflecting the foggy sky above. Harry stood shivering on the shore, wearing only shorts and a shirt.

“Coward!” Astrid accused, leaping through the water like a seal. Harry wasn’t the only one boggled by her behavior. The few other people on the beach were wearing toques and anoraks.

“Coward!” a little voice cried from behind him. It was Astrid’s sister Mhairi, happily digging through the sand for shells while their mother watched over her.

“Fine,” Harry said, slowly approaching the water. He wasn’t really cold at all, Astrid’s mum had made sure of that. He was mostly nervous about drowning. He had confessed in his letter to Astrid that he didn’t know how to swim, and she was determined to teach him. Perhaps the ocean wasn’t the best body of water to practice in. In fact, Harry was positive it wasn’t.

Water lapped over his feet and he shuddered. There was one man in a full wetsuit paddling around on a surfboard. Harry decided that man was insane.

“You can do it!” Astrid shouted, somehow swimming in place. A small wave knocked her over, and Harry shambled forward, scared she’d been sucked out to sea, but she popped back up, grinning like a maniac. “See? I’m fine! It’s just water!”

“I know what dwells in these abyssal depths,” Harry said darkly, flinching as water splashed against the hems of his shorts.

“It’s the shore, there’s nothing *abyssal* here,” Astrid said, letting the water push her towards him. “You’ll be fine, you just got to get used to it.”

“Acclimatize,” Harry said.

Astrid grabbed his wrist and pulled him further out. A wave crashed into him, but the water wasn’t that deep and he was able to stand back up, only to get bowled over again.

“This sucks,” he gurgled, spitting out frigid salt water.

“It’s great,” Astrid countered. “Though maybe a pool would have been better.”

“You think?”

“It’s really not that hard,” she said. “Even dogs can swim. Babies can too. Mhairi’s got a wading pool shaped like a turtle.”

Harry tried to respond, but he got swamped by yet another wave.

Astrid's parents were really nice. They didn't question Harry about his own parents, which he assumed was Astrid's doing.

Astrid had written to him to say yes, her family was going to the Bangers match, and to tell him her floo address. He'd gone to the Leaky Cauldron first, then her house in Footdee, an old fishing village. From the outside it appeared to be a one-room stone house, but inside was considerably larger. There was even a garden, and a half pitch Astrid coaxed him into flying around. It was all warded against muggles, hiding them in plain sight.

It was strange being in someone else's home. The smell was different. He had no idea what the rules were. His dad's house was mostly filled with books and potions supplies, and wasn't so overt about its magic. Astrid's house burst at the seams with quidditch gear, portraits that scrutinized him, Mhairi's toys, Astrid's toys, smug books that made his fingers twitch to open. Harry couldn't comprehend half of what was happening.

Both of Astrid's parents worked from home, mostly. Her dad Rory worked as a magical book binder, and her mum worked for the Ministry maintaining the spells meant to keep muggles ignorant of the various magical areas within and around Aberdeen. Harry also learned Astrid's dad had married into the family, and not the other way around. It was her mum whose older brother, Elphinstone, had died.

Harry had been to other people's houses before, in Cokeworth. It was always in a group, when the person's parents or grandparents were out, or passed out drunk. It was different, formally meeting Astrid's parents, sitting down for lunch and then dinner with them, playing with her little sister, being shown around. Astrid's room was exactly like her, though Harry was a little surprised to see the Holyhead Harpies poster next to one of the Weird Sisters. It looked like her trunk had exploded, her school things strewn all over the place. Unnecessarily, given a spell or two could easily arrange things.

"I think my parents like you," she whispered to him as they went through all the books she had. Harry hadn't grown up with any magical kids books. He didn't know any of their nursery rhymes or fairy tales, though he learned a number of the former thanks to Mhairi singing them at top volume.

There was something going on in the Ministry which called Astrid's mum away the second evening Harry was there. Her dad distracted them by pulling out some board games. Some Mhairi could play, like one where they had to build an elaborate trap for a mouse, placing strategic pieces of cheese. After Mhairi was put to bed, they tried a more complicated game where they had their own armies and had to take over the world. Their various units kept shouting advice to them. Then Astrid's dad brought out an old tent and set it up in the back garden for them. Harry was shocked to find the tent contained an entire house inside, which made him wonder why poorer magical people didn't have similar accommodations. It wasn't as if tents were very expensive.

When Harry left the next morning, after breakfast, it was with an invitation to return. He shook Rory's hand, was pulled into a hug by Colleen, then Astrid, then Mhairi demanded to be picked up and planted a jam-flavored kiss on his cheek. Wrinkling his nose, Harry said his final goodbyes and the floo took him back to the Leaky Cauldron, and then home.

Harry was having doubts about his outfit, but it was nearly time for him to meet up with Cedric and his dad was getting visibly frustrated with his dithering.

“Do you think I look stupid?” Harry asked.

“You’re wearing muggle clothing,” his dad said, not looking up from the *Daily Prophet*.

“So is that a yes?”

“Please, just...just go. You’re going to be late.”

His dad was right. Harry hurried through the floo into the Leaky Cauldron, right into the lunch rush. He’d already eaten something—beans? Toast? It was a blur—and he was meeting Cedric at Fortescue’s for ice cream. He didn’t wait for someone to open up the brick wall, but took out his own wand and tapped it. No one called him out on it, so Harry assumed the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery didn’t apply in Diagon Alley. How would the Ministry even prove it?

Fortescue’s wasn’t that far from the Leaky Cauldron, and Harry’s apprehension over the shirt he had chosen was replaced with anxiety over meeting Cedric’s father. His mother Wenna had been nice enough. Harry could only hope Amos Diggory was the same.

“Harry!”

Harry smiled when he spotted Cedric standing up and waving to him. Next to Cedric was a tall, bearded man with a genial smile.

“You must be Harry Evans!” Cedric’s dad boomed, drawing startled looks from passersby. Harry glanced at Cedric, whose smile was looking a little strained, then took Cedric’s dad’s hand. The man had a very firm grip.

“Amos Diggory,” Cedric’s dad said. “Have a seat, Harry, have a seat! Cedric’s told me all about you, of course, but I like to hear things straight from the abraxan’s mouth!”

“It’s nice to meet you, sir,” Harry said, worried his arm might fall off.

“So,” Cedric’s dad said. “Didn’t expect my son to go for another boy! Can’t really carry on the family name!”

Harry stared at him, at a loss for words. Cedric looked mortified.

“Uh, dad, maybe we should order?”

Mr. Diggory chuckled and slapped Cedric’s back. “Alright then, Ced! I’ll treat you boys!”

Harry awkwardly followed them inside, overwhelmed by the variety of flavors available. The number of nut-based toppings made Harry a little worried, as dying in front of Mr. Diggory would be immensely embarrassing. He played it safe and got a scoop of dirigible plum.

“Are you sure you don’t want any toppings?” Cedric asked.

Harry hesitated over revealing his allergies, but he could see no real reason to hide them. He didn’t need to worry about being singled out for having a muggle affliction by Cedric.

“I can't eat peanuts,” he said. “Or shellfish.”

“Oh,” Cedric said, but his dad exclaimed, “Really? Fancy that!”

Harry thanked Mr. Diggory for the ice cream, and the man waved him off. It was only two sickles, which Harry understood wasn’t a lot of money. To some people.

“What’s that you’ve got on your teeth?” Mr. Diggory asked as they began eating. “Ced’s told me there are a lot of rumors going around Hogwarts about it.”

“They’re retainers, sir,” Harry said, explaining what they did, and in the process what braces were.

“That’s a nice shirt,” Cedric said, smiling.

“Thanks,” Harry said, looking down. His shirt had a roast pig on it. His grandfather had won it at a meat raffle. It was the closest thing he had to a sausage. He knew people often wore team colors and emblems to sports games. Cedric and his dad were practically fluorescing in their Chudley Cannons merch.

Amos Diggory asked a lot of questions.

“Who are your parents?”

“Dad...”

“They’re dead, sir.”

“Sorry to hear that! How did it happen?”

“*Dad...*”

“Slytherin, eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I heard you were involved in that whole Quirrell mess!”

Harry was feeling very put on the spot. He wondered if, in the extremely unlikely event he introduced Cedric to *his* dad, if he’d be put under similar questioning. Harry really, really hoped not.

“I was thinking that maybe we could go around muggle London?” Harry said once Mr. Diggory paused for a breath. “I heard about a park—”

“Muggle London?” Mr. Diggory exclaimed.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “They’ve got parks and museums. History, science, art, that sort of thing.”

“Bit risky, isn’t it?” Mr. Diggory asked. “All those muggles?”

“Dad, Harry’s familiar with the muggle world,” Cedric said. “Aren’t you always saying they’re harmless?”

“I have lived with muggles my entire life,” Harry said, glancing at Cedric. He didn’t seem *that* surprised to find out.

“Well, that explains some things,” Mr. Diggory muttered.

“There are millions of muggles in London,” Harry continued. “Lots of kids our age who do things on their own. If it’s safe for muggles, why not us?”

“*Millions?*” Mr. Diggory said. “Merlin’s beard!”

“Maybe some other time?” Cedric offered.

“Great Scott!” Mr. Diggory said, jumping out of his seat. “Look at the time! We don’t want to be late boys!”

They hurried away from the ice cream shop to an open spot. Mr. Diggory pulled out an empty packet of heirloom carrot seeds. He held it out for them to touch, and before Harry could think *portkey* he was being ripped out of space like a fish out of water.

Cedric helped Harry up from where he had collapsed on the ground. They had landed on top of a hill in some countryside, and Harry saw a small stadium had been erected in a field.

“First time using a portkey?” Mr. Diggory said affably.

“Thanks,” Harry said, smiling at Cedric, who blushed furiously.

“Sorry,” Cedric said quietly. “I should’ve known you hadn’t done it before.”

“It’s alright,” Harry replied. “I thought we’d be apparating.”

Mr. Diggory was already walking downhill, and after Harry brushed himself off they began to follow.

“You’ve apparated before?” Cedric asked.

“For my dental appointments,” Harry said. “I have to go every few months, during school.”

“Oh, cool,” Cedric said. “Dad’s not very good at apparating, so mum won’t let him side apparate anyone.”

Mr. Diggory had got pretty decent seats, high up in the stands. Based on the amount of orange the crowd was wearing, Harry worked out it was the Cannons’ home stadium. There was a cluster of Banchory Bangers fans in black and blue. They were a little confused about their banners. Some had posters with sausages, others with black dragons. Harry wished they’d got seats closer to Astrid, wherever she was, but they’d agreed to find each other after the game. Harry did feel a bit out of place wearing a black shirt with a roast pig on it in a sea of orange. Even more so when he saw a large group of red-heads seated in the row behind them.

“Arthur!” Mr. Diggory exclaimed. “Molly!”

“Amos!” Mr. Weasley said, standing up to shake hands vigorously. “And Cedric! It’s been a while since you’ve been round the Burrow! And who’s this with you?”

“Hi, Evans,” Fred and George said, grinning.

“Good afternoon, Weasleys,” Harry said, nodding to the twins. Ron gawked at him, not an unusual expression for the boy. Their little sister wasn’t paying attention, bouncing in her seat as the commentator began calling out player names.

“I’m Harry Evans,” Harry said, smiling politely at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

“Top of the class,” Fred said.

“Gobstones champion,” George said.

“Slayer of dark forces,” Fred said.

“That’s enough out of you two!” Mrs. Weasley said. “Harry, dear, it’s lovely to meet you.”

Harry glanced at Percy, who was also staring at the quidditch pitch and ignoring everyone around him. Harry really didn’t know why he was wearing his prefect’s badge during summer holiday, and he’d been stuffed into a Cannons shirt. It was an interesting combination, and absolutely clashed with his hair. The same held true for the rest of his family.

“Likewise,” Harry said.

“Nice shirt,” the twins said.

“Boys!” Mrs. Weasley snapped.

“What?” George asked.

“It is!” Fred said.

“Shut up!” their sister whined. “They’re about to release the snitch!!”

Harry turned back around, sharing a look with Cedric. He was less interested in the game than in Cedric’s interest in it.

“So,” Harry said, a smile playing on his lips. “You think they’re going to win?”

The Cannons, against all odds, won.

Cedric grabbed Harry’s hand in his excitement, but let go just as quickly. Mr. Diggory was right there, after all, even if he was so swept up in the Cannons’ triumph as to not notice. The Weasleys were also losing their minds, Ron and Ginny in particular. Harry snuck a look at them and saw Mrs. Weasley summoning fireworks away from the twins, Mr. Weasley applauding with a big smile on his face. Ron looked close to tears. Percy was clapping very politely, and had a bored expression. Harry turned around to hide his laugh.

“I bet Astrid’s upset,” he said into Cedric’s ear, which turned red.

“Did *you* like the game?” Cedric asked, looking a little concerned.

Harry nodded, smiling up at him. It was really cute how easily Cedric blushed.

The stadium began to empty in waves, people making their way to the portkeys taking them home.

“This makes them ninth in the league, right?” Harry asked as they waited for their turn.

“Just wait until they play Falmouth!” a familiar voice cried out.

“Astrid, love...”

Harry turned, smiling, and saw Astrid wearing a sausage roll-shaped hat, glaring at the celebrating Cannons fans.

“Enjoy this feeling while it lasts!” she shouted. “Pricks!”

“Astrid!”

Harry excused himself and waded through the crowd.

Astrid’s ranting cut off when she spotted him. “Harry, can you believe this? That quijudge was out of her mind!”

“People still say *quijudge*?” Harry asked, smirking at her.

“I’m people,” Astrid said. “I say it!”

“Harry, it’s almost our turn!”

Astrid grinned evilly at him. “Better run back to your boyfriend.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Harry mumbled, glancing at Astrid’s parents, who were pretending to not listen.

“Hi, Harry!” Mhairi said, waving.

Harry waved back. “I’ll see you later.”

“You better owl me!” Astrid shouted at him.

Harry rejoined Cedric and his dad.

“Who was that?” Mr. Diggory asked, squinting through his glasses.

“Astrid Urquhart, sir,” Harry said. “She’s in our year. In Slytherin with me.”

“Urquhart, eh?” Mr. Diggory said thoughtfully.

Harry had no idea what he meant by that, and was sort of relieved when the portkey took them back to Diagon Alley.

Harry and his dad sat across from each other at the kitchen table in Spinner’s End. They were surrounded by owls.

His dad blinked. Harry blinked.

“It is your birthday,” his dad said.

“Yes,” Harry agreed.

It wasn’t really *that* many owls. His friends had bullied his birthday out of him. Astrid sent him a shirt with a sausage roll on it, which Harry would absolutely wear. The image had steam coming off of it, and sort of smelled like a sausage roll. He had no idea where she had got it, and suspected she might have made it herself. From his other friends he got a nice notebook, quills, ink, chocolates, and a magazine from Adrian which his dad set on fire. Harry *really* wished he’d opened that one at home. Cedric sent him a case for his gobstones, which was very thoughtful as Harry had been carrying his set around in a bag.

“I do not typically acknowledge holidays, birthdays included,” his dad said. “However, I shall make an exception for you.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, smiling a little.

“I have made several plans for the day which I hope you find satisfactory,” his dad said.

Harry sat up, surprised. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Perhaps not, but I wanted to.”

Harry had told his friends that he already had plans, otherwise he suspected something would have been planned for him. He usually spent his birthday alone, but had hoped he’d be able to do something with his dad. He knew when his dad’s birthday was, he’d seen the birth announcement, but didn’t know how he’d react if Harry tried to do something for him. A gift would likely be fine, or a card. A party? Out of the question.

After lunch, Harry’s dad apparated them to Manchester, where he led Harry to a skateshop.

“Your contraption is falling apart,” his dad said, looking incredibly put off by the establishment. “You may select a new one.”

“I...” Harry was at a loss for words. His dad was buying him a birthday present. A kind of expensive birthday present. A *muggle* birthday present.

“Is this acceptable?” his dad asked. “Would you prefer a broom?”

Harry smiled up at him, and his dad relaxed.

“No,” Harry said. “Absolutely not.”

Damaged Easily

Chapter Summary

July 1992

Chapter Notes

Véronique: [sees two puppets] Is that me?

Alexandre: Of course it's you

Véronique: Why? Why two?

Alexandre: I handle them a lot when I perform. They get damaged easily

The skateboard deck was cool. There was no other word for it. It had a design of a large green snake on it, and while Harry was slightly tempted to get the one with a skull chomping on a snake, his dad didn't seem very amused by the idea.

Harry was sort of reluctant to ride it, especially trying something like a grind or a slide, not that Cokeworth had many solid rails to try such tricks on. But skateboards were meant to be used, it was inevitable the design would get scratched up. He also got a few skating magazines, and the shop had a list of skateparks in Britain which Harry was tentatively excited to check out. He thought Astrid might be interested, and he did have an old board he could give her.

There was one awkward moment when one of the employees recognized him. It was an older teenager he had met the previous summer, John, who had moved to Manchester to work in his cousin's shop.

John had asked if his dad was, well, *his dad*, and the uncomfortable silence afterwards made Harry remember what rumors about his parentage had been spreading around the teenagers of Cokeworth.

"Absentee father isn't the worst thing that has been said about me," his dad had later said, after Obliviating John. "And there is an element of truth."

Most muggles kids were still in school, and it was the middle of the week, so their next stop was more peaceful. It was a deserted skatepark, and Harry couldn't believe his dad had even heard of such a thing.

Harry knew watching someone practice something wasn't very exciting. Attempting the same thing over, and over, and over again took a lot of patience, and a lot of falling. But his dad watched the entire time, which was kind of awkward but Harry eventually got used to his small audience. He was really excited to try out the quarter pipes, and he could ollie high enough to get onto ledges, and the rails, though he knew he had to skate faster to slide. What happened in the bowl was better left forgotten.

When Harry was getting tired, and had started to get hungry, he skated up to his dad. His dad had got out a book to read at some point, and Harry was curious what it was about, but had still kept an eye on him. As far as Harry knew, most parents left their kids to their own devices, but it was nice showing off, even if it was a muggle thing.

"Do you want to try?" Harry asked. His dad was pretty young still, only thirty-two. It was a shock for him to realize his mum had only been four years older than Harry was when she'd had him.

"You could not pay me enough," his dad said bluntly. "No quantity exists which could compel me to propel myself around on a board with wheels."

Harry grinned at him. "There's not a lot of magical ground transportation is there? Do you think we would have ever invented the wheel?"

His dad closed his book and gave him a considering look. "No, I don't believe we would have. Have you exhausted yourself yet?"

"I was going to try jumping those stairs again," Harry said. "I think I've almost got it."

"Perhaps you should try simply getting over them first," his dad suggested. "Without the..." he waved his hand around. "Flip."

"Heelflip," Harry said. "I think my problem is committing."

His dad frowned in thought. "Though I admit I am not familiar with this activity, based on my observations you have shown proficiency."

"Thanks," Harry said. He didn't know if his dad was just saying things, but given most of Harry's practice had been done in a dungeon under the cover of darkness, he thought he was doing rather well.

After his dad healed him of his minor injuries—Harry had nearly cracked his head open in the bowl, key word being *nearly*—they went to a sandwich shop for food. Harry had never been to a sandwich shop in his life, it was too expensive. He hadn't even seen one before, no one would build cafes or delis in Cokeworth. They didn't even have McDonalds. So it was a novel experience, even if his dad acted like it was a little low class for them.

It was so surreal seeing his dad out in the muggle world. Severus Snape didn't quite fit, and not in the same way other wizards didn't since he knew how to act the part. He understood muggle money, transportation, terminology, how to dress like one. But it was obvious, at least to Harry, that his dad didn't belong to the muggle world, nor did he want to. They probably

both would have been more comfortable somewhere like Diagon Alley, or a magical village, but that was out of the question. There was the risk of running into muggleborns who knew either of them, but his dad hadn't scrupled to Obliviate someone who had cottoned on.

Harry was happy to eat his coronation chicken sandwich and watch the muggles go about their day. He did have to take his blood-red potion, which his dad hadn't named yet, but got to wash it down with caramel macchiato and a sweet and flaky kouign-amann.

If someone had asked Harry what he wanted for his birthday, he wouldn't have been able to say. He hadn't celebrated it in years. His thirteenth birthday had been a nightmare. The pain, learning he was intersex, learning what that meant for him. Before that, the last birthday he had celebrated was with his gran, not long before she died. She had baked a cake for him, nothing special, just one out of a box. What he remembered most was her bracing herself on the stove, coughing blood into a handkerchief, telling him that no, she didn't need help, she could bake her grandson a cake. Harry didn't think he was worth all that, and it made him feel incredibly guilty. It wasn't a good memory. So many memories of his gran weren't.

But his dad understood. He'd grown up in Cokeworth, he knew that going out to eat *anywhere* was special. And while Harry suspected there was a certain element of making up for lost time, he deeply appreciated his dad going to any effort at all. He didn't have to acknowledge Harry, and Harry wouldn't have blamed his dad if he had chosen to ignore him. It would have hurt, but he would have understood.

After their meal, his dad asked, "Would you like to see a film?"

Having never been to a movie theater before, Harry readily agreed. However, he didn't know what any of the movies were about.

"I know what Batman is," he said dubiously, looking up at the marquee. "And Peter Pan. Doesn't he use fairy magic to fly around?"

His dad snorted. "Rubbish."

The only other film showing was *The Double Life of Véronique*. Neither of them had heard of it, but it sounded more promising than the other two.

Harry soon regretted his decision. He liked the film, it made him melancholic for a reason he couldn't quite identify, but he could have lived without the unenviable experience of watching a movie with nudity with a parent. It didn't matter how tasteful it was, it was still awful.

There was a tradition Harry had, which started with his grandparents. The day before his brother's birthday, they would stay up until midnight and wish Monty a happy birthday. Knowing more about his brother, Harry suspected his brother rarely had a *happy* birthday.

Monty had friends at Hogwarts, though, and Harry hoped they would be sending his brother gifts. He knew if he sent too many anonymous presents, it would be suspicious, so Harry held back.

That year, he was in the Tesco car park, skateboarding. It was dead, which was fine by him. He tipped over a trolley to practice jumps over, and there were plenty of curbs to grind on. He was still working on his speed so he didn't end up planting, and needed to get wax to make it easier. Was there some potion he could apply to his board? The potions they made in class were meant to be imbibed, but there were also potions for cleaning, pest control, the entire field of alchemy...

He eventually skated home, not paying much attention to the old man shouting at him to keep it down. It wasn't *that* loud. He settled into a fitful sleep, nightmares of silver blood, shattered mirrors, and an insidious, sibilant voice plaguing him.

The rest of the day was strange. He went to his dad's house for breakfast, worked in the garden for a bit, finished his Potions essay—borrowing a few books from his dad, which the Potions Master turned a blind eye to—had lunch. It was a normal day by any measure, but something was off. He was restless. Harry kept looking out of windows or up at the sky. He could barely sit still, which was strange in and of itself.

His dad eventually kicked him out of the house, citing his unusual hyperactivity and muttering to himself about child psychology and potions. Harry tried skating it off. One of the magazines he'd got had stills from an American video called *The Questionable*, which Harry would have killed to get his hands on. To say it was inspirational was an understatement. They'd been playing it at the skateshop. Even if Harry had a copy he didn't have a tape player. Or electricity. One of the tricks was called a frontside 360 shove-it heelflip, which was much too long for a name. But it looked fucking amazing, and Harry was determined to get it down.

After a few hours of falling on his arse, Harry went back to his dad's for dinner then went home. He thought about moving in with his dad, but his dad hadn't offered and Harry knew it was a bad idea. What if there were visitors? He liked having his own space, too, even with the ghosts he lived with. Knowing ghosts were real, Harry sometimes wished his mum had stuck around. The ghosts at the school seemed fine with their lot. But what would his mum have haunted? The place she had died in?

He went to bed still feeling restless. He flipped through skating magazines, his fourth year books, his most recent letter from Astrid, threw bits of food at Benjy, then blew out his candle and tried to force himself to sleep.

He woke up with a start. Something was tapping at his window, and Benjy was screeching at him. Harry fumbled around for his wand and quietly got up. He nearly dropped it when he saw what had woken him.

It was Hedwig, Monty's owl.

Harry ran to the window and flung it open. Hedwig was in bad shape, missing feathers and breathing heavily.

“Something’s happened to him,” Harry said, panicking. “Is he...is he okay?”

Hedwig gave a weak hoot. Monty was alive.

Harry picked Hedwig up and started to run.

Someone was hammering on his door. Severus scowled in annoyance. He was at a critical stage for this potion, it was the sort he couldn’t work on with his son around. Abandoning it now would be days of wasted effort, but the knocking didn’t stop. It was past midnight. There was only one person who would dare knock on his front door. His son needed him.

Potion forgotten, Severus hurried out of his lab and to the front door, throwing it open. Harry was standing there with a snowy owl in his arms, panting, his eyes wild. Severus summoned a Calming Draught for him. It was second nature, and Severus was now in the habit of carrying any potions his son would need at all times.

“It’s Monty, something’s happened to him!” Harry said. “This is his owl, she came to me.” He ignored the vial in Severus’ hand, looking up at him with pleading eyes. The exhausted owl watched him expectantly.

“And what do you wish me to do about it?” he asked. Severus wasn’t sure there *was* anything he could do. He knew where Monty Potter lived, of course. The number of owls sent to Number 4 Privet Drive had been obscene, and it had taken nearly a week for the headmaster to send Hagrid to investigate. Why Dumbledore hadn’t sent someone more competent, like Minerva, Severus didn’t know. Some plan of the headmaster’s he wasn’t privy to, no doubt.

“Can you check on him?” Harry asked. “Those people he lives with. They’ve hurt him before.”

Severus looked at his son. How could he explain his presence at Privet Drive in the middle of the night? The way he had treated the Potter boy, he doubted any assistance would be accepted from him. But if the boy didn’t know...

“Very well,” he said. His son was asking him for help, was asking him to help Lily’s *other* son. “Get inside. Don’t go into the lab.”

Harry nodded and hurried inside, still clutching the owl.

“Please help him, dad,” Harry said, hugging the owl to his chest.

Severus froze, his cloak half on. Harry had never called him that before. It was always *sir* since he had revealed the truth. He swallowed, an unfamiliar emotion blooming in his chest. He didn’t have time to dwell on it.

“I shall return shortly,” he said, amazed at how level his voice was, and apparated on the spot.

His apparition hadn’t been as elegant as Severus preferred. There was a small *pop*, loud enough to startle a nearby cat. It ran off into an unkempt front garden. Severus ignored it, looking to see if he had alerted any muggles. Privet Drive was dark and silent. Its mundanity was suffocating. All of the houses looked the same. Manicured lawns, sedans in driveways. There wasn’t an excuse for it, like in Cokeworth with its blocks of crumbling council housing. Even then, Cokeworth had *character*, wretched as it was. Privet Drive was indistinguishable from any other suburb.

Severus walked across the street to Number 4. The windows were dark, the house was silent. He unlocked the door with a wave of his wand, puzzling over how easy it was for him to approach. Had the headmaster not put any spells to keep out marked Death Eaters? His mark didn’t even twitch. He quietly stepped inside, his eyes immediately finding the cupboard Harry had mentioned. Severus hadn’t really believed that, but the padlock on the cupboard made his blood run cold.

He unlocked it and peered inside. There was a trunk shoved in at an angle. Underneath it was a thin mattress with a ratty blanket.

Lily’s son, stuffed into a cramped cupboard. Locked inside. How long? How many times? Had no one checked on the boy?

Why hadn’t he?

Disgusted, Severus shut the cupboard door. He knew that Potter had been given *Dudley’s second bedroom*, and he inferred *Dudley* was dear Petunia’s spawn. Magic had completely passed by the harridan and her get, highly unusual for a muggleborn with siblings. They all usually ended up at Hogwarts. It was an old theory, more of a superstition, that those without magic were found wanting, were undeserving of it somehow. And yet the existence of the Dark Lord, the things he had done, the things he had *made* others do, disproved such dross.

Severus walked up the stairs. So far everything seemed normal. Boring, but normal. When he reached the landing, his eyes immediately fell on a locked door. A door locked from the outside. None of the other doors had such a lock.

He could hear someone crying inside.

No, things were not normal at Privet Drive.

Severus had to improvise. He pulled his hood over his face and charmed his cloak auror-red. He unlocked the door, stepped into the room, and quickly shut it behind him. He cast a discreet silencing charm. It wouldn’t do for Potter’s relatives to awaken. He couldn’t think of the Dursleys as being related to his own son.

There was a gasp.

“Who are you?” a tremulous voice asked.

It was Monty Potter, blinking at him owlishly with those damnable green eyes. He'd seen Lily cry plenty of times. Because of her sister. Because of him. It was disturbing how much Potter looked like her in that moment.

"I'm from the Ministry," he said, pitching his voice higher. "Can you explain to me what happened this evening?"

Severus looked around the room. It was like a storm had blown through it. Scattered papers, ripped books, broken toys and electronics. Accidental magic? A tantrum? Had his things been destroyed by his relatives?

An empty owl cage with a padlock on it. A padlock, on an owl cage. If a child, why not an owl?

Sickening.

"Are you going to arrest me?" Potter asked, sitting up.

Severus was taken aback. "For what?"

"I got a letter," Potter said, and he told Severus what had happened that evening.

A house-elf named Dobby had been stealing Potter's mail all summer. Another flaw in whatever security Potter was given, and Severus suspected that security was *none at all*. Oh, the days of muggles killing their magical children were in the past. Mostly. It didn't stop a child from being beaten, or starved, or locked up like an animal. In an asylum. In their own home. It had happened to Fleamont James Potter, their ostensible savior. Dumbledore had promised to keep Lily and her family safe. He had failed once, and it was obvious he had failed yet again.

The house-elf had revealed itself during a dinner Potter's aunt and uncle were hosting, demanding that Potter not return to Hogwarts that year due to some undefined danger. Something the house-elf overheard from its family, no doubt. When Potter refused, the house-elf proceeded to disrupt the dinner, alerting the Ministry to magic occurring around a minor as no magical adults had been present. Just a house-elf. The Ministry truly was incompetent to ignore the magic of creatures.

Potter showed him the letter from the Ministry's Improper Use of Magic Office. Hover Charm? A first-year wouldn't know that. Nonsense. Rank stupidity.

"My uncle said he's going to lock me up," Potter said morosely. It was pathetic, but Severus didn't snipe at him. Harry wouldn't be happy with him mocking his devastated little brother. "That he won't let me go back to Hogwarts. I let Hedwig out. At least she could be free, I thought..."

Severus looked at the locked cage. Had Potter used magic to get the bird out? Why hadn't there been a warning from the Ministry about that?

"You are not under arrest," Severus said. "And you will not be kept from going to Hogwarts."

Potter sagged with relief. "Then...why are you here?"

Severus closed his eyes in frustration. "Were you harmed at all?"

Potter frowned and looked away. "My arm hurts where my uncle grabbed me, but he didn't hit me this time."

This time.

It could be *his* son here.

Severus reined in his anger.

"Is there anywhere else you can stay for the remainder of the holiday?" he asked.

Potter was quiet for a moment. "My friend Ron said he would invite me to stay at his house this summer."

"Very well," Severus said. He could work with that.

The Weasleys lived at the Burrow, in Ottery St. Catchpole. Harry had been getting owls from one of the Weasleys all summer, and while his son was sly, Severus had more experience. He had been a spy, not that he'd told Harry that. Perhaps one day.

"I shall escort you there," he said. "I am not strictly authorized to be here, so I would prefer you do not mention my involvement. I suggest you explain to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley what happened this evening. Arthur Weasley works for the Ministry, it is possible the warning you received could be recanted."

"Really?" Potter asked, his eyes sparkling with hope.

"Yes," Severus replied shortly. "Where are your belongings?"

Potter looked around his room. Rather, the room he had been locked in. "My uncle locked my trunk in the cupboard downstairs."

Severus nodded and went to retrieve the trunk. He knew where it was, but hadn't wanted to admit to snooping around. Once back in the bedroom, he saw Potter pulling things from under a loose floorboard. The child had been hiding all of his school books in it, apparently, and his wand.

"Get the owl cage too," he said. "Your owl will find her way back to you."

"Thank you," Potter said softly.

It didn't sit right, how easily he accepted help from a complete stranger. Anyone could have strolled in and snatched the Boy Who Lived up. What the hell had happened to him in this house?

"Did you wish to leave a note for your...family?"

“No,” Potter said firmly. “They won’t care anyway.”

It hadn’t taken long for Severus to apparate Potter to the Burrow. He had never been before, but he had a vague idea of where it was. He watched from the shadows as Potter knocked, and after a few minutes saw a short woman in a dressing gown open the door. Potter was quickly taken inside, and lights were turned on.

It was the best solution Severus had, unless he wanted to magic Potter’s family into more acceptable behavior. It would raise too many questions if anyone discovered they were tampered with.

He hoped Potter would explain to the adult Weasleys what had happened. There was no explanation Severus could give for him knowing, of him even finding out something was amiss at Privet Drive. Potter hadn’t recognized him. There was at least that. A random, altruistic auror was plausible enough. If the headmaster got wind of the story, Severus hoped he would give Potter’s residence adequate defenses. If not...

Severus turned on the spot, apparating home to his son.

Traditional Northern Irish Ham

Chapter Summary

August 1992

A silver phoenix burst into the kitchen, scaring the shit out of Harry.

“Severus, I need you at the school immediately,” the phoenix said in Dumbledore’s voice. Then it faded away.

“What the fuck was that?” Harry asked, heart pounding. His dad continued calmly sipping his coffee.

“A patronus,” his dad said.

Harry grabbed his hair and put his head down on the table, taking steadying breaths. Hedwig gave a worried *hoot*. She was still recovering from her mad flight. Harry had no idea how far she had traveled.

“A patronus,” Harry repeated. It sounded vaguely familiar. “It’s to send people voice messages?”

His dad scoffed. “No, *that* is an affectation of the headmaster. It’s a defensive charm to protect against certain dark creatures. Dementors, lethifolds, boggarts, and the like.”

“How are those even remotely related?” Harry asked, watching as his dad stood to leave.

“Dementors and boggarts feed on emotions. Dementors feed on the soul, lethifolds on the body, two sides of the same coin.”

“Soul?” Harry asked. “I thought that was a metaphor.”

His dad sighed and summoned a book. “I must return to the castle. There is a staff meeting, so I will not be back for some time. You may read that. Stay out of the lab. I left a volatile potion there last night, and I’ll need to deal with it personally.”

Harry bowed his head. “I’m sorry.”

“I did not say that to assign blame, but to clarify my instruction.”

Harry jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“He will be fine,” his dad said. “He’s at the Weasleys.”

Harry bit his lip and nodded. “Thank you, sir.”

The hand on his shoulder tensed, then was gone. His dad cleared his throat, and Harry looked up.

“You may address me however you wish in private,” his dad said, then he swept out of the room. A little ostentatious, given he was only walking out of the kitchen. Harry heard the floo flare up, then his dad was gone.

He looked down at the book he’d been given.

“A Study into the Possibility of Reversing the Actual and Metaphysical Effects of Natural Death, with Particular Regard to the Reintegration of Essence and Matter,” he read, grinning at Hedwig. She cocked her head.

“It’s about necromancy,” he explained. “I wonder why he has this?”

After some thought, Harry decided he didn’t want to know. It was too sad.

Severus walked to the headmaster’s office, clearing his mind, building his story. He had been working on a potion late into the night. Frustrated with the lack of progress, he eventually retired. He woke up, made himself coffee, and then the headmaster’s patronus arrived.

A fairly typical day for Severus Snape.

“Chocolate lime,” he said to the gargoyle, slightly revolted. He rode the magical escalator—Harry’s description, not his—up to the headmaster’s office. The door was already open, as the castle portraits had undoubtedly told the headmaster he was on the way.

“Ah, Severus,” Dumbledore said, smiling moronically at the esoteric silver instruments spinning and glittering and doing various magical things on his desk. “I’ve received an owl from Molly Weasley. It seems young Monty arrived at her home late last night in pursuit of sanctuary.”

Severus looked at him blankly. “You summoned me here to inform me Potter is at a sleepover?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “No, no, nothing so frivolous! Monty told Molly quite the interesting tale. It seems a house-elf attacked one of his uncle’s guests with the pudding, and Monty received a harshly worded note from the Ministry.”

Severus snorted. He could see why the letter he had read might scare a twelve-year-old, but it was a form letter. Everyone who was caught doing *underage sorcery* was sent it.

“I fail to see how this concerns me,” he said.

“Indeed, I’ve already sent an owl to the Improper Use of Magic Office,” Dumbledore said. Severus wondered if he would do the same for any other student. “Hopefully the situation will be remedied. Miss Hopkirk was always an excitable girl! No, Severus, what concerns me is an owl I received from Mrs. Arabella Figg.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. He’d never heard the name. “Figg?”

“An elderly squib who lives a few houses down from Monty,” Dumbledore explained. “She tells me one of her kneazles alerted her to someone entering the Dursleys’ home.”

“Dursleys?”

“Monty’s aunt and uncle,” the headmaster said. “I believe he has a cousin the same age.”

Severus kept his face neutral. Interesting how the headmaster omitted the given names of Potter’s aunt and uncle.

“I remain at a loss as to *why* I am being informed of this,” Severus said. “Forgive me, headmaster, but I *do* have potions to work on. My job, if you recall? If that is all...”

“I’m afraid I will have to ask you to do something for me, Severus,” the headmaster said solemnly. “I know you went to great lengths to protect Monty last year, and I must again lean on the promise you made to me all those years ago. The strange house-elf, Dobby, we need to discover who he serves. I have already written to Monty asking if he knows anything about the person entering his home. With his address known to the Ministry, Monty is at a greater risk.”

Severus didn’t need to ask *from what*. Plenty of former Death Eaters and sympathizers worked for the Ministry. That he had been able to walk through the front door without issue demonstrated how lax any protections around the home were.

“Why don’t you move the boy?” Severus asked. “The Weasleys breed like rabbits, surely another child wouldn’t strain them overly much.”

“No,” Dumbledore said, a little distantly. “Monty must stay with his mother’s family, at least for part of each summer. So long as he does, Lord Voldemort cannot touch him.”

Severus stared at the headmaster. Perhaps the old man really was incompetent, and any appearance of wisdom or rationality was simply an atypical manifestation of dementia. “And can other people *touch* him? Some unknown person entered Potter’s home for an equally unknown reason while the boy was completely vulnerable, only an old squib and muggle relatives to protect him.”

“You so easily cut to the heart of the problem, Severus,” Dumbledore said happily. “While Monty is safely tucked away at the Burrow, and soon here at Hogwarts, we have until next summer to devise some protective spells to ensure the safety of Monty and his family. You’ve always been interested in the Defense post, so you could consider this a fun little project!”

“I am overjoyed,” he said.

“Now that that’s settled,” Dumbledore said, standing, “I believe it is time for our staff meeting. We have two new hires this year. Charity Burbage is our new Muggle Studies professor, you may recall her from your school days?”

Severus did not.

Dumbledore laughed good naturedly. “Well, I am *positive* you’ve heard of our new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. He’s quite the celebrity, he might even give Monty a run for his money!”

Severus wished he had never got out of bed that morning. “Don’t tell me. I implore you.”

“Gilderoy Lockhart!”

Harry looked up from his book when he heard the floo. His dad stormed into the kitchen and coffee immediately began making itself. He was in a black mood.

“Do not purchase your Defense books this year,” his dad commanded, crossing his arms and staring furiously at the kettle until it boiled.

“Why not?” Harry asked.

His dad closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Gilderoy Lockhart is the new Defense instructor. *Professor*,” his dad spat, “fails to encapsulate the overweening ineptitude of that deplorable dunderhead.”

Harry knew who Lockhart was. Everyone did. His exploits were reported on in the *Daily Prophet*, though most ended up in his books, which you could purchase for a mere five galleons. You could get five *actual* defense books for the same price.

“How many books of his are on the list?” he asked.

His dad looked away from the coffee and gave him a small smile. “Seven.”

Harry sat back. “There’s no way. That’s nearly all of my school allowance.”

“There’s a new Muggle Studies professor, too,” his dad said. “Charity Burbage. A muggleborn who was a few years below me. She went to a muggle university after Hogwarts and got a degree in sociology.”

“Did we get a new history professor?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Binns still clings to his miserable existence,” his dad said, frowning at the slowly percolating coffee. “Pity Time-Turners only work one direction. I’d rather skip through our pointless staff meetings.”

“Time-Turners?”

“A *privilege*,” his dad sneered, “for students who take twelve courses. Or more, when Hogwarts offered more. Our current population can’t support it. We can barely staff the school.”

Harry gaped at him. “You’re telling me they let students *travel through time* to take extra classes?”

His dad laughed harshly. “A stunningly puerile use for such a powerful magic, don’t you agree? As far as I’m aware, only Minerva and Filius have petitioned the Ministry for Time-Turners. It’s under the purview of the Department of Mysteries, I believe. Part of the argument goes that since, if time is stable, the student will or already have got a Time-Turner, they will or already have been approved.”

Harry smiled to himself. “So *that’s* how he’s been doing all those classes.”

“Is it?” his dad asked too casually.

“The coffee’s ready,” Harry said, hiding his blush. “What’s the new Muggle Studies professor like?”

Harry watched his dad pour them both cups of coffee, then sit at the table with an odd light in his eyes.

“I didn’t realize you had an interest in Muggle Studies,” his dad said, “considering you were raised by muggles.”

Harry took a sip of coffee to avoid answering, wishing he had kept his mouth shut.

Dear Mr. Evans,

Harry rolled his eyes. Percy’s letters always started off like that. One day, Harry would get him to call him *Harry*.

You have asked me what it is like for the Boy Who Lived to live with us, an understandable line of inquiry given Fleamont Potter’s station in our society. My mother says he is a delight. In general he is a quiet boy eager to help out with chores around the Burrow, primarily degnoming the garden. He and my younger siblings often play quidditch together, and he is generous enough to let them try his Nimbus 2000. He is effectively a new addition to the family, a distant cousin (we technically are cousins, fourth if my memory serves), and it is not

dissimilar to having an additional sibling, though I do not profess to being as 'close' to Fleamont as Ronald, Fred, and George. Ginevra is evidently 'starstruck' by the 'Boy Who Lived,' and is rarely seen these days. I confess, the way our society has portrayed Fleamont is at odds with the boy as I know him. I imagine this is typical of all celebrities. Do muggles have celebrities?

Speaking of muggles, I am pleased to hear that the new Muggle Studies professor is 'competent.' Having a muggle degree in studying muggles speaks highly of her abilities. With regards to Gilderoy Lockhart, while I was inclined to share my mother's estimation of the man, recent events have demonstrated the validity of your apprehension.

Mother attempted to instruct us on degnoming using Lockhart's methodology. Given we have been hurtling gnomes over our hedge since infancy, it was unnecessary. Additionally, upon receiving our letters from Hogwarts, we discovered that sixth, fourth, second, and first-years all have the same seven books assigned for Defense.

As you can imagine, this has caused some distress. I approached my mother with the suggestions you made in your previous missive, to simply not purchase the books, to purchase one set and share it amongst ourselves, or to borrow from friends. Your offer to share your own copies is deeply appreciated. Given you, Fred, and George share the same class, it is a reasonable solution.

I have approached my father regarding your other advice. Should my mother manage to purchase five sets of all seven books, and based on her admiration for Lockhart this is becoming increasingly likely, father has agreed to return them at a later date.

Your list of Defense books appropriate to our years has caused something of a stir. On the one hand, adhering to the professor's set curriculum is vital to succeeding in a class. On the other, I have seen Fred and George's marks.

Ronald and Fleamont have made arrangements to meet with their friend Miss Hermione Granger on the 19th. My entire family shall be going to Diagon Alley that day. Should we happen to meet, please do not hesitate to say 'hello.'

Regards,

Percival Septimus Weasley

Rising Sixth-Year

Gryffindor Prefect

Twelve OWLs

Harry set down the letter and covered his mouth to stop himself from laughing. He'd asked Percy if he wanted to be called Percival instead, which had gone totally ignored. Maybe he wanted to be called Prefect Weasley?

Deciding that train of thought needed to be derailed, and possibly driven off a cliff, Harry considered the politics of who you went shopping with at Diagon Alley. Obviously he would be going on the day the Weasleys were, since he would get to see his brother. But there were also his friends to think of, and Cedric.

Harry picked up that day's *Daily Prophet*, grinning mischievously.

"Your mother used to make that face," his dad said. "You're plotting something."

He tried to wipe the expression away, inordinately pleased at the comparison. He hadn't asked his dad any questions about his mum, or what had happened between them. How they had become friends, why they had stopped, what it was like when they went to Hogwarts, things his gran couldn't tell him. He knew it was a painful topic for his dad, and he suspected Severus Snape mourned the loss of Lily Evans more than the entire magical world put together.

More pertinently, his dad could tell when he was up to something. He would have to work at better masking his emotions. His dad seemed to use anger as a crutch, making *that* the response to everything in order to cover whatever else he might be feeling. He had a reputation for being generally unpleasant, and Harry was certain his dad *really* leaned into it. Harry didn't know if he could cultivate such a one-dimensional persona. Unless it was being quiet? He was pretty good at that. He could go months without talking.

"You needn't tell me if you don't wish to," his dad continued. He wasn't an easy man to read, given his typical expressions were *indifference* and *fury*, but the more time Harry spent with his dad, the more he was able to pick up. He thought his dad *did* want to know what he was planning, if only to be included in his life. And it wasn't something he *had* to hide from his dad, though he wouldn't admit the entirety of his plan, as it was, to anyone else.

"The Irish Ham is doing a book signing next Wednesday," Harry said. The name *Gilderoy Lockhart* was nearly as stigmatized as *Voldemort* in their household. Harry was curious what exactly Lockhart had done to piss off his dad so much, beside the whole being a useless fraud thing.

"And this is relevant, why?" his dad asked.

"The Weasleys are going to be there on the same day," Harry said. "Among other people."

His dad nodded. "It's a good story. With the Ham—" his dad rolled his eyes, he wasn't as fond of codenames "—as a centerpiece, it's a reasonable justification for going that day."

Harry was already composing letters to his friends.

“Where’s Monty?”

“He must have got out at the wrong grate, oh dear.”

Harry had arrived at Diagon Alley bright and early in anticipation of seeing his brother for the first time in nearly two months. He flooed to the Leaky Cauldron first, having no justification for using floo to get anywhere given he lived among muggles, who in general did not have very big fireplaces and, if they did, weren’t connected to the Floo Network. He lingered around the bank of fireplaces that let out directly into Diagon Alley, hidden out of direct sight in a narrow alley.

The wrong grate. Harry narrowed his eyes as the Weasleys scattered, frantically searching for his brother. But only in Diagon Alley, it seemed.

Harry tugged the hood of his cloak down and pulled Benjy from his pocket.

“I need you to find him again,” he whispered, tossing the little thestral into the air. Benjy flew away from Diagon Alley, and Harry hurried after him. How the hell had his brother flooed into Knockturn Alley?

He didn’t have to go far. Benjy stopped in front of Borgin and Burkes, and dove back into Harry’s pocket. Harry was incredibly curious about exactly how models functioned, particularly since the one he had got wasn’t static. It learned, like an artificial intelligence built by mice.

Annoyingly, Harry saw Draco Malfoy and his father walking towards him. He hurried into the shop, searching for the fireplace. He spotted his brother immediately, covered in soot and getting shakily to his feet.

“Shit,” Harry said under his breath, walking up to Monty.

Monty looked up at him through broken glasses, startled. “Evans?”

“Be quiet and do as I say,” Harry hissed, ripping off his cloak and throwing it over his brother. He looked around, but didn’t see the old man from last time. “I’ll get you out of here.” He took out his wand and quickly fixed Monty’s glasses, vanished the soot coating him, and disillusioned him. It was okay for a no-name like Harry Evans to run around Knockturn Alley, but Monty Potter? It’d make headlines.

Thankfully, Monty didn’t seem inclined to disobey, too surprised someone had found him so quickly. The door opened again, Mr. Malfoy and Draco stepping through.

“Stay close to me,” Harry whispered, walking towards the door. Unfortunately, the Malfoys saw him.

“What are *you* doing here?” Draco asked, sneering at him.

Mr. Malfoy looked unhappy at his son having recognized someone. “Do you know this... young man, Draco?”

“Harry Evans,” he said, only addressing Mr. Malfoy. “I’m in Slytherin with your son, going into fourth year.”

“Evans,” Mr. Malfoy said thoughtfully. “A muggle name, isn’t it?”

“What’s a *mudblood* like you doing here?” Draco repeated, annoyed at being ignored.

“Draco!” his father snapped.

“I was looking for a Copernican sphere,” Harry said, continuing to the door and hoping Monty was following him. “I can’t really afford a new one on my school stipend.”

Draco smiled in vicious glee. “Poor *and* a mudblood!”

“I know, it must be like winning the lottery for you,” Harry said evenly, examining Draco and his father. “Though, if you’re pawning things to Borgin and Burkes, it seems like you need it.”

“Mr. Malfoy!” an obsequious voice called out. It was a different man from the last time, younger and greasier. Borgin? “What a pleasure to see you again!”

Harry smiled slightly. “*Again?* How intriguing.”

Mr. Malfoy gave him a dark look, and placed a hand on Draco’s shoulder. Draco winced. “I apologize for my son’s behavior, Mr. Evans. I trust we can keep this encounter just between us here?”

Harry just wanted to get his brother out of the store. He didn’t really care what Draco and his dad were selling. “Of course, Mr. Malfoy. Have a good day.”

Borgin had been watching the two Malfoys greedily, and was as eager for Harry to leave as Harry was to go. He didn’t waste time, flinging the door open a bit too hard to give his brother time to get out.

“Hold onto my shirt,” Harry hissed. “There are a lot of people who would love to snatch a kid like you up.”

Harry relaxed when he felt his brother’s fingers tighten on his shirt. He walked them towards Diagon Alley—“I’ve got my own fingernails, thanks,” he said to a mossy-toothed witch who rattled a tray at him—ducking into a convenient alcove to remove the disillusionment from Monty. His brother looked a little sick, from both the floo mishap and his close encounter.

“Thanks,” Monty said. “I’m not sure what would have happened if you hadn’t found me. What were you doing in there anyway?”

“I was going to look around,” Harry said. “They’ve got some interesting things, but most of it’s cursed. I’m sure you would have figured something out on your own. You’ve never been

in Knockturn Alley, have you?"

"Is that what this place is?" Monty asked, looking around uneasily. "I've never heard of it before."

"It's not exactly a place for kids," Harry said. "Well, except for the kids who actually live here. Werewolf kids, half-vampires, part-veelas, half-goblins. A lot of people with mixed heritages." The more Harry talked, the more he realized he was describing a ghetto. He knew that Knockturn Alley wasn't just for the poor magical peoples, but the not-entirely-human ones. Those two groups had significant overlap. It was racism, legally justified racism.

"It isn't necessarily dangerous," Harry said, noting the look on his brother's face. "It's like a poor muggle neighborhood. People are more afraid of outsiders than you are of them. You could be an undercover auror, or someone looking for *fun*, you know?"

"Uh, no, not really," Monty said. "What's an auror?"

"They're like magical police," Harry said. "I don't think I've ever actually seen one. They work for the Ministry and wear red robes."

"So *that's* who that was!" Monty said excitedly.

Harry frowned. "You've met an auror before?"

"No," Monty said quickly. "What?"

Harry shook his head. "Never mind. Are you here alone?"

"I was supposed to get out at the same grate as Fred and George. Weasley," Monty added. "They're probably looking for me."

Monty started taking off the cloak, but Harry stopped him.

"You know you're famous, right?" Harry asked.

"I know," Monty said, a little bitterly.

"What happens to muggle celebrities when they're in public?"

"They get a lot of attention?" Monty said. "When Hagrid brought me here last year, everyone in the Leaky Cauldron wanted to shake my hand. It took ages to get out of there."

"And do you want that to happen again?" Harry asked.

"No," Monty said. "I really don't. You're saying I should wear a disguise?"

"I think so," Harry said. The thought of his brother running around Knockturn Alley... Harry himself had never felt in danger, but Monty was a different story. He wasn't some random Hogwarts student wandering around Knockturn on a lark. He was a symbol, not just in Britain but across the world. Everyone knew his name. Everyone knew his face.

“You can charm your hair and eyes different colors,” Harry said. “Wear more traditional clothes, like robes. Transfigure your glasses, or get new ones. Your dad wore the same style, I think that’s part of why people say you look so much like him.”

“But we can’t use magic outside of school,” Monty pointed out.

“We can if there’s an adult witch or wizard around,” Harry said. “It doesn’t trigger the Trace. I just used magic, do you see any owls from the Ministry?”

Monty looked up, actually searching the sky for owls. It was adorable. “No. What the hell? Why did I get one because of—” Monty’s mouth snapped shut.

“There’s too much magic going on here,” Harry said gently. “The Trace doesn’t tell them who used magic, just that magic happened around a minor, but *only if* there isn’t an adult around. You could also ask someone older to help disguise you, but it’s good charms practice if you do it yourself.”

“I didn’t even bring my wand with me,” Monty muttered.

Harry heroically didn’t react. “Keep the cloak for now, you can give it back to me later.”

Monty smiled up at him. “Thanks. Again. Wait, what happened to your fish?”

“Oh, her,” Harry said, not looking up at Frankie, who was very much alive and well. “She swam off to better waters. Come on, let’s go find your Weasleys. Keep the hood up.”

They’d come out near Gringotts, and Harry was happy to see Hermione Granger on the steps with two people who must have been her parents. They certainly looked like muggles thrilled to see how the sausage got made. He scanned the street for some Weasleys, and saw Percy immediately. He’d got even taller over the summer. With him were his father and brothers, running down the street. Percy saw him too, and Harry gave him a brief nod.

“Ask Mr. Weasley to Weasley-fy you,” Harry whispered. “I’ve got to exchange my promissory note at Gringotts.”

“Got it,” Monty said. “Maybe I’ll see you later?”

“Probably,” Harry said, smiling. “I’ve got to do my shopping too. Do me a favor, don’t mention it was me you ran into, okay?”

He left his brother to deal with the Weasleys and walked into Gringotts, glad the Weasleys provided such a good distraction. Hermione had seen them too, and was leading her parents over, completely ignoring him. It was early enough that the wait for a teller wasn’t very long, and Harry exchanged his promissory note for fifty galleons. He didn’t really *need* it now, since he still had galleons from selling the unicorn blood—and incidentally assisting some vampires in suicide, which Harry tried not to think about—and his dad could afford his school things. But it was part of the ruse. Harry felt bad for anyone else who got the stipend, only to spend the majority of it on trash Lockhart books.

Harry checked his watch. There was about an hour until the Lockhart signing started. He planned on meeting his friends there, Cedric included. It was going to be chaos. As he passed by a junk shop, someone grabbed his arm and pulled him in.

“What were you doing with Fleamont?” Percy asked in a low voice, a hard look in his eyes.

“Nice to see you too, Percival,” Harry said, gauging Percy’s reaction to the name. There wasn’t one, which was disappointing.

“Evans,” Percy said warningly, looming over him.

“I ran into him in Knockturn Alley,” Harry said, his heart beating quickly. “And I showed him the way out. That’s all.”

Percy watched him for a moment, then released his arm. “Fine.”

Harry smiled weakly. “Since we’re here, may as well look around.”

“That *was* my intention,” Percy said, pushing his glasses up. “I didn’t want to confront you out in the open.”

“How opportunistic of you,” Harry said, moving further into a shop. It truly was a *junk* shop, with a little bit of everything. Robes and cloaks with stains and holes, cracked cauldrons, broken scales. Amusingly, there was a Copernican sphere whose only flaw was its lack of enchantments. Harry picked it up, it was only a few knuts.

Percy had been drawn by the small book selection. Harry looked over to see what he had found. It was a rather dense-looking book titled *Prefects Who Gained Power*.

Smiling to himself, Harry moved into another aisle just as the door opened. He looked over and spotted Ron and Hermione, along with another red-haired boy.

Harry stopped dead.

Monty looked *exactly* like their mum at that age. The same dark red hair and bright green eyes, the same expression of curiosity and wonder. Except for the glasses, and Harry understood *that* was what it was. The messy black hair, the glasses, the pureblood family name. That’s what people saw when they looked at Monty Potter, erasing all traces of their mum. She was just a muggleborn, after all.

Shaken, Harry watched as the trio approached Percy. Ron started reading from the back cover of the book.

““A study of Hogwarts prefects and their later careers,”” Ron quoted. “That sounds *fascinating*.”

“Go away,” Percy said, not looking up from the book.

There didn’t seem to be anything of much interest to Monty and his friends in the junk shop, so they did little exploring. A missed opportunity, in Harry’s opinion, as he’d just found some

yellowed *astragali*, knucklebones for divination, which he was almost certain were human. Harry caught the tail end of whatever Ron was rambling about as the three kids left.

“...he’s very ambitious, Percy, he’s got it all planned out. He wants to be Minister of Magic...”

Harry frowned as he saw Percy’s shoulders stiffen.

After a few minutes Percy left too, apparently having forgot Harry was around. He wasn’t too bothered by it, he knew Percy preferred to keep their association quiet. Harry did as well. It would create too many questions. A sixth-year, a Gryffindor, a prefect, a Weasley. There was no reason for their social circles to overlap, none whatsoever.

Harry walked over to check out the books himself. He noticed *Prefects Who Gained Power* had been left on the shelf. Harry picked it up, wondering why Percy hadn’t bought it. It was the perfect book for him. He opened up the cover and saw the price scribbled on a page. Two sickles. Not so cheap when your family was being asked to spend nearly two hundred galleons on books.

Harry added the book to his other items and continued looking around.

When he was done in the junk shop, having successfully stuffed his bag with things he could fix up and gift to people, Harry went around Diagon Alley for his school supplies. His dad had already got him potions ingredients, but he still needed parchment, quills, ink, new robes, an abacus, straightedge and compass, pencils, chalk...

Harry eventually made his way to Flourish and Blotts. The only thing from his book list he didn’t have already were all of Lockhart’s books, which he definitely wasn’t buying. He had made sure to spread the word around, though some of his friends turned out to be fans of Lockhart. Phoebe, Terence and, most baffling of all, Adrian. As such, they were the only three willing to face Diagon Alley that day.

There was a substantial crowd outside of Flourish and Blotts, mostly middle-aged women but a few men as well, and plenty of Hogwarts students. He spotted Adrian near the back of the crowd and walked up to him.

“Alright, Evans?” Adrian said, grinning at him.

“Pucey,” Harry said, playing along. “Where’s Phoebe and Terence?”

“Pheeb’s up front with her nan,” Adrian said. “The great git saved her village from a naga or some shite. Terence is with his mum, she’s a big fan.”

“You aren’t?” Harry asked.

“Ah, sure, I like the stories,” Adrian said. “But that’s all they are, aren’t they? Da was a few years ahead of him, said Lockhart couldn’t charm himself out of a paper bag.”

Harry nodded. That was about what he’d heard from his dad.

“There’s your man,” Adrian said, slinging an arm across Harry’s shoulders and turning him around. He saw Cedric standing with his mother, speaking to a girl Harry recognized as the Ravenclaw seeker. There were other people too, mostly kids in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw who he recognized as Cedric’s friends.

“Not going to stake your claim?” Adrian said, jostling him a little.

“Sod off,” Harry said, not entirely sure if he should do as Adrian suggested. He liked Cedric, quite a lot, but there was an underlying sense of unease whenever Harry thought about being someone’s boyfriend. What sorts of expectations would they have? What was he meant to do?

“They’re like kelpies,” Adrian was saying. “Smell blood in the water and they start to frenzy.”

Harry didn’t know if he was talking about Lockhart’s fans or Cedric’s, then the crowd started to move.

“Go on,” Adrian said, giving him a little push. “I’ll go find the girls.”

“Is Terence included in that category?” Harry asked, desperately hoping that *he* wasn’t.

“If you’d seen him go on about Lockhart, you’d agree,” Adrian said, charging into the crowd. Harry lost sight of him immediately, but he could see Cedric and made his way over. He was still talking to the Ravenclaw seeker, Cho Chang, so Harry waited, feeling a little awkward, until Cedric finally saw him. His face lit up with a smile and he hurried over to Harry.

“I was worried I’d miss you,” Cedric said, standing a little close. Harry blamed it on how crowded it was.

“I don’t know if I even want to go in,” Harry said, eying the squealing horde.

“My mum’s queued for an autograph,” Cedric said, taking Harry’s hand. “It’ll be harder to get separated like this.”

“Okay,” Harry said faintly as Cedric towed him along. “Are you getting all of his books?”

“Of course,” Cedric said cheerily. “Mum and dad are fans. Dad swears by his *Guide to Household Pests*.”

“That must be useful,” Harry said, dodging a precarious stack of books, a stray Weasley, and a pram with three squalling children of various ages. “For his Ministry work.”

“Absolutely,” Cedric said. “Which books do you need? We can go around each section.”

The Lockhart signing was happening at the back of the shop, so while it was heaving, it was a concentrated heave.

“I’ve got most of them already,” Harry said. “I buy used copies, since I’m on a school allowance.”

“They give out allowances?” Cedric asked.

“In some cases,” Harry said. “If you’re poor enough.”

Cedric grimaced. “I should have known that. Sorry.”

Harry squeezed his hand lightly, and Cedric smiled shyly at him.

“It’s alright,” Harry said. “It’s not like I’ve talked about it. So, yeah, I’ve already got my books. But I can help you carry yours.”

“That’s very gallant of you,” Cedric said warmly. “Hey, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you—”

There was a loud cheer, followed by raucous applause.

“Maybe now’s not the best time,” Harry said, talking over the crowd. “You’ve got your book list?”

There were a few other students shopping, though most had gone to look at Lockhart or whatever one did in the proximity of a celebrity. Harry didn’t like the thought of people being so obsessive about Monty, but that was the reality. Someone like Lockhart was eclipsed by a child hero. Even Dumbledore didn’t get nearly as much acclaim, despite having actually defeated a dark lord in a duel. Harry reckoned it was due to Dumbledore’s age. People had become desensitized over the decades.

He reluctantly let go of Cedric’s hand to help gather his books. Harry was a little dismayed to see Cedric grab not just the seven *required* Lockhart novels—they absolutely were not textbooks—but *all* of his published works, including the autobiography being released that day. Harry slid copies into his bag.

“It’d be funny if he used a ghostwriter,” Harry said as they headed upstairs for the books on muggles.

“Ghosts can’t write,” Cedric said offhandedly, searching the shelves.

“No, I mean—”

“Excuse me, you’re blocking the aisle.”

Harry looked over and saw a mildly irritated Percy.

“Sorry about that,” Cedric said, standing up with a book. “I’ve got it.”

Harry saw the book was titled *Quaint Muggle Machinery*. “What’s even in that?”

Cedric opened it up. “A...millstone?”

Harry looked over at the picture, which had a woman wearing a fairly simple dress and pushing a millstone in a circle.

“I think that book’s about ten thousand years out of date,” Harry said, nudging Cedric down the aisle to give Percy space. Harry turned back to look at him. “What are you getting, Prefect Weasley?”

The tips of Percy’s ears turned red, and for a moment Harry was worried he’d taken what he’d said as a jab.

“*The Philosophy of the Mundane*,” Percy said. “*Why the Muggles Prefer Not to Know*.”

“Granger’s parents are downstairs,” Harry said. “You could ask them what they’d prefer.”

Percy’s lips twitched. “Based on what I know of our new professor, I’m hoping she intends to critique this particular work. The title itself is indicative of the author’s biases.”

“It’s a step up from...” Harry picked a book at random from the shelf. “*Moronic Muggles*. Wow.”

Harry turned back to Cedric. “You wanted to get those Lockhart books signed, right?”

“Oh, yeah,” Cedric said, blinking a few times and then smiling. “Mum’s probably queued up still.”

“Alright,” Harry said, nodding to Percy. “Weasley.”

“Evans,” Percy said, his eyes flicking to Cedric. “Diggory.”

Harry and Cedric walked back downstairs. It was even more crowded than before.

“You know Percy Weasley?” Cedric asked.

“Not really,” Harry said. “I’ve seen him a few times in one of the library archives at school. He gave me detention once for using magic in the corridors. And we met the Weasleys at the game, right?”

“Right,” Cedric said. “So, um, would you like to get something to eat after this?”

“Sounds great,” Harry said. “I’m famished.”

“Brilliant,” Cedric said, pink tingeing his cheeks.

Just as they got to the queue, there was a commotion.

“Get him, dad!”

“No, Arthur! No!”

“Gentlemen! Gentlemen, please!”

Harry couldn’t see over the crowd, but suddenly Hagrid was there, carving a path and pulling two people apart. It was Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy, both looking worse for the wear. Harry could see the rest of the Weasleys looking on apprehensively, and even Draco had gone pale.

Monty was there too, still with red hair and wearing Harry's cloak, as was Hermione and her parents. He wondered if Percy had seen. He couldn't hear whatever words they exchanged. Something rude, based on everyone's faces. Then Mr. Malfoy stormed out of the shop, Draco following in his wake, an unpleasant expression plastered on his face.

"I can't believe Lucius Malfoy's fighting like a muggle," Harry said, a little loudly. "Do you think he's forgot how to use his wand?"

Someone coughed loudly at that, and Harry suppressed a grin when he saw it was Percy, standing on the staircase and obviously having seen his father pummeling Malfoy.

"Come on," Harry said, bumping lightly into Cedric. "Let's hope Lockhart hasn't pissed himself at seeing a real fight."

Overpriced Pabulum

Chapter Summary

August/September 1992

Holidays with Hags was mediocre.

Gilderoy Lockhart was a technically decent writer, though Harry wondered how much of it was his editor. The sheer number of encounters Lockhart had with hags strained credulity. He knew from Lockhart's biography—which the book dedicated a chapter to as opposed to other authors who restricted theirs to a mere paragraph—that Lockhart was four years younger than his dad. He wondered where Lockhart had found time to hunt down hags across the world, master all the magic he claimed to have done in the book, and proceed to write a six hundred page novel. And nine others. He'd only been out of Hogwarts ten years.

Harry hadn't needed to steal the books, he could have paid for them. He *wanted* to steal them. It was so easy, too. A packed shop, someone else causing a distraction, a bag with expansion charms, too many people to notice any spells cast, any alarms triggered. He knew he was taking money from Flourish and Blotts and not Lockhart directly. But Lockhart using his position at Hogwarts to shill his own books, to profit from families like the Weasleys who struggled to make ends meet, and other students who didn't have money...it infuriated Harry.

It was hard to find Defense professors. Fewer and fewer people were willing to teach the class when some terrible fate would befall them at the end of the year. Every year, without fail, for decades. For someone like Lockhart, a position at Hogwarts was another feather in his cap, not that there was much room for more feathers based on the hat he wore in his author's photograph. Being a Defense professor legitimized him in a way his travelogues didn't.

Harry checked his watch and glanced at the floo. He was in the Leaky Cauldron, waiting for Cedric. After the kerfuffle at Flourish and Blotts the previous week—the Lockhart signing, the fight between Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy—Cedric's mum had hurried him home with his signed books, and Cedric later sent him an owl asking to meet before school. Harry was excited to show Cedric around London. He hadn't spent much time in the city himself, but he'd memorized all the buses and trains, and he had a list of places to go which his dad had grudgingly helped with. He was really excited to go to a record store, since he'd never been to one, and the radio reception in Cokeworth was awful.

He smiled as the fire went green.

Severus looked at the foolish expression on his son's face and internally groaned. It was just his luck his foray into fatherhood had begun in his son's teenage years. It was getting easier, too, to allow himself to think of Harry as *his son*. Harry had called him *dad*. He was permitted to care that a foppish Hufflepuff nearly a year older than his son was slaverling over him like a dog with a bone.

Severus did not care for dogs.

Given Harry had returned in the same state he had left, arriving in time for dinner as Severus had gently requested, Severus relaxed.

"Good evening," he said, looking Harry over. "Did you find...knocking about...London enjoyable?"

"Good evening," Harry said, smiling slightly. "It was fun. I got some things," he said, lifting a plastic bag. "Cedric was confused about the tapes, but they've got listening booths at record shops. I think I might have traumatized him."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "What did you make the poor boy listen to?"

"Einstürzende Neubauten," Harry said with a grin, setting his bag down and taking a seat at the table.

Severus shook his head. He'd heard Harry listening to different pirate radio stations in the garden, using the same old radio Lily had *borrowed* from her father, which they had taken apart and enchanted in fourth year, before...

Harry had tried to explain the difference between industrial and post-industrial, but Severus wasn't sure his son even understood it. It was just noise to Severus, and when he'd said as much Harry had laughed as if he'd made some immensely clever joke.

It was fortunate his particular teenager had such diverse taste, there was only so much screaming in German a man could take. Perhaps not so fortunate for Cedric Diggory, who might have struggled to understand the significance of *Halber Mensch*, notwithstanding the language barrier, or what Harry might have been trying to tell him. He didn't have a cunningly hidden fish to translate it for him.

Harry was fidgeting, which was unusual for the boy.

"What happened?" Severus asked.

He gave Harry time to answer, glancing at the stove to make sure nothing had boiled over. Unlikely, now that he had bothered to purchase and read books on cooking with magic. Severus had always eaten whatever had been put in front of him, or nothing at all, and his mother had been reluctant to let him cook when ingredients were scarce. One false move, one burnt meal, would result in a beating.

Harry needed regular meals, meals that took his dietary restrictions and requirements into account, so Severus learned how to cook. It wasn't *that* dissimilar to potion-making.

"He asked me if I wanted to go out with him," Harry said, looking fixedly at the table.

Severus was of the opinion his son was far too young to *date*. Perhaps in a few years. Cedric was the oldest student in Harry's year, born early in September, just after the cut off, while Harry was the youngest. A one year difference was significant at Harry's age. And Harry wasn't like other students. Trust and vulnerability were inherited in *dating*, and even if Harry was at a more appropriate age for such a thing, Severus didn't feel Harry knew Diggory well enough. Severus certainly wouldn't trust a fifteen-year-old with the sorts of secrets Harry had, the sort of privacy his son needed.

He'd had years to evaluate his own behavior while at Hogwarts. His fixation on Lily. The years which separated them imbued those memories with a harsh clarity. He had been *obsessed*, still was to a certain extent, and had viewed Lily as his salvation. From poverty, from Cokeworth, from his father's rage and his mother's despair. From himself. He wanted, expected, demanded too much from a girl who simply wanted a friend. Severus knew Lily pitied him. He understood her, and as much as he hated James Potter for it, he understood why she had chosen him in the end.

"What was your response?" Severus asked calmly.

"That I wanted to be friends for longer," Harry said quietly. He hid his face in his hands. "God, this is embarrassing. Everyone's been going on about it. Is this some cultural thing I don't know about? I didn't want to say *no*, but I didn't want to say *yes* either."

"You're a few years too young to debut," Severus said. "And it's the end of the season."

Harry gave him an unamused look, and Severus held back a smirk.

"No, it isn't a *cultural thing*," he said. "Many of your schoolmates have young parents, which is rather unique to this generation as a consequence of the war. We are also more aligned with muggle cultural mores than some may lead you to believe."

"So I didn't ignorantly commit a faux pas?"

Severus was out of his depth. No one had ever asked him for relationship advice. He wasn't Pomona, consoling students over bad break ups or *crushes* or who fancied who, or whatever drivel their students disgorged. But Harry was asking *him* for something. Advice? Whatever scant experience he had?

Severus had never in his memory spoken to his parents about anything meaningful. His parents knew as little about him as he could get away with, not that either had been particularly interested in him.

What was *normal* in a father-son relationship?

He hadn't the faintest idea.

“No,” he said. “It is perfectly within your rights to establish boundaries.” He hesitated, then asked, “Was he displeased with your response?”

Harry huffed a laugh. “He wasn’t *pleased*, but he did say he wanted to get to know me better, so I think it went okay.”

Severus rose to check the food, glad for a distraction. Perhaps he should purchase some parenting books. Harry had a fair bit more on his plate than most others his age.

“I don’t think I’m going to tell anyone,” Harry said. “I don’t want people to start talking about me rejecting Cedric Diggory.”

Severus scowled at the thought. Rumors had already gone around Hogwarts about Harry. In the event of some *falling out* with the Diggory boy, he couldn’t start taking points and giving detention to anyone who maligned his son. What a nightmare.

“That is sensible,” he said, opening the oven to check on the roast. It had been years since the oven was last used, but liberal application of charms had goaded it into compliance.

Harry could manage his own affairs with the student body. He was subtle, intelligent, and magically gifted. As far as Severus knew, Harry had only used magic against another student to disarm them, in the defense of a third student. He doubted Harry would pick up his old habit of cursing anyone who looked at him sideways. Unlike Severus, Harry wasn’t malicious.

“Thanks,” Harry said. “For listening, I mean.”

Severus looked at his son, who appeared to have settled down.

“I remain at your disposal,” he said.

Harry laughed again, which made Severus feel he had done something right.

“Did you want any help?” Harry asked. “I helped gran cook all the time.”

What had Severus’ mother done? *Go to your room and be quiet*. Doing the opposite of what his own parents had done was working so far.

“You may,” he said. There really wasn’t much left to do, honestly, but Harry seemed pleased to be included. Perhaps they could make a dessert?

“Thanks...dad,” Harry said.

Severus quickly summoned a cookbook. “You are fond of sticky toffee pudding, correct?”

Harry smiled at him. “It’s my favorite.”

Severus hoped they had all the ingredients. Would summoning them directly from Tesco violate the Statute of Secrecy?

It was irrelevant, he could afford the fine.

Kings Cross was swarming with muggles, and witches and wizards trying their level best to blend in. Harry had found the bench he'd sat on the previous year, and was waiting for his brother to arrive.

It was fairly easy to not look like a wizard trying to look like a muggle. Harry just wore his regular clothes. Frankie and Benjy were both invisible to nearly everyone, his trunk was shrunken and in a pocket, along with his ticket. He was reading another one of Lockhart's books, *Break with a Banshee*. Like the others, it was a collection of encounters with a particular creature, though, given banshees were found almost exclusively in Ireland, and were rare even there, Harry wondered how Lockhart had come across so many, and why he had defeated them in such unique ways.

Gilderoy Lockhart may not have been able to charm himself out of a paper bag, but could he charm his way into a book deal?

Harry was pulled from his thoughts as a bespectacled, red-haired man in robes sprinted past him. He checked his watch, unhappy to see there were only ten minutes until the train left. The Weasleys had left it a bit late. Cedric had invited Harry to share a compartment on the train, and while Harry wasn't sure he would fit into Cedric's friend group, he was looking forward to seeing the other boy.

It would have been faster for Percy's parents to charm all six trunks than bother with the trolleys, but they were clearly panicking. Harry closed his book and stood, moving closer to the barrier, watching as Percy went first, followed by Mr. Weasley, then Fred and George, then Mrs. Weasley and Ginevra, leaving Ron and Monty last.

They had left Monty last. Were they out of their minds? There was a minute left! Monty should have been first, he was the *Boy Who Lived*, for the love of—

Monty and Ron's trolleys crashed into the barrier. The very *solid* barrier.

"What in blazes do you think you're doing?" a guard shouted.

Harry hurried forward, checking his watch. It was eleven. The Hogwarts Express was already gone.

Hedwig was rolling around in her cage, shrieking her head off, so Harry picked her up and tried to soothe her.

"You two alright?" Harry asked.

Monty was getting up on his own, clutching his ribs. Harry didn't go for his wand, there were muggles everywhere and no adult witches or wizards in sight. Presumably they were stuck on

the other side of the barrier.

“Yeah,” Monty said, his face pinched in pain. “What’s going on?”

“I have no idea,” Harry said. “I just got here, the train I took was late.”

“The train’s left,” Ron said, staring in shock at the uncooperative barrier. “Mum and dad... what if they can’t get back? What are we going to do?”

“Wait until someone fetches us,” Harry said, setting Hedwig down so he could help straighten the trolleys. “They’ll know something’s wrong soon. We can kip on the benches over there until then.”

“What if they *can’t* though?” Ron insisted, looking around nervously. They had attracted a lot of attention, Hedwig in particular.

“There’s other ways to get to Hogwarts,” Harry said, not giving them a choice and pushing his brother’s trolley towards a bench. “We can go to the Leaky and use the floo, or call the Knight Bus.”

Harry immediately wrote off using the floo. No floo, not with what happened after Monty’s first experience.

“The Knight Bus,” he decided.

“What’s that?” Monty asked.

“It’s a magical bus,” Harry said. “Shows up wherever you summon it. They run ads in the *Daily Prophet*, haven’t you seen?”

“I don’t usually read the paper,” Monty admitted.

Harry decided to hold his tongue about that. It might be for the best for his brother to have limited exposure to the news, especially any news about Monty Potter. He reached the bench and sat down, waving for the two boys to join him, thinking over the situation.

He had two twelve-year-old boys with him. Trains were always running late, so he thought his excuse for missing the Hogwarts Express was plausible. That and the blocked barrier. How and why the barrier had shut down wasn’t relevant to their current predicament, and not something Harry could investigate on his own. That was best left to Hogwarts and the Ministry, who could manage the number of muggle onlookers.

Since the barrier had closed right after Mrs. Weasley and Ginevra had gone through, and right before Monty and Ron had, Harry suspected whoever or whatever had done it had meant to keep his brother from getting on the train. His dad had told him about some crackpot house-elf giving Monty doomsday threats.

Harry didn’t know much about house-elf magic, largely because no one did. They were magically enslaved to wealthy witches and wizards, typically from old pureblood families. They didn’t care how house-elf magic worked so long as it did, and weren’t inclined to

elevate their slaves to something worthy of academic study. Could a house-elf close off the Platform 9 ¾ entrance? Maybe, and there was at least one with the motive. Or perhaps whoever the house-elf served had done it, which meant there could be a hostile adult witch or wizard observing them.

After about fifteen minutes of the two boys whispering frantically to each other, Monty spoke up.

“You said your train was late?” he asked.

“Yeah, I live up north,” Harry said vaguely. He had taken his dad’s floo to the Leaky Cauldron and walked, and usually the Leaky was too busy for anyone to notice who was coming in and out. Using the floo suggested he had access to a floo, access to a magical home, and the Floo Network Authority could track him. Harry didn’t think he rated Ministry attention, but it paid to be careful. Maybe his dad could apparate him next year? “It takes a few hours to get here.”

Ron frowned at him. “Where up north?”

“The Midlands,” he said.

“That’s not really *north*,” Ron said.

“It’s north of *here*,” Harry said pointedly.

“No one’s come through,” Monty said, looking at the barrier. “Should we keep waiting?”

“Who cares what he thinks?” Ron said. “We can take the car!”

Harry snorted. “You’re twelve, you can’t drive.”

“It’s a—”

Ron slapped his hand over Monty’s mouth. Harry watched the two of them, wondering what kind of car it was. Enchanted, probably. Self-driving? Flying?

“Weasley, take a look around you,” Harry said. “We’re surrounded by muggles. You can’t use a magic car to get to Hogwarts, it would violate the Statute of Secrecy, and Potter’s already got one warning from the Ministry.”

“That was rescinded!” Ron said, his cheeks going red.

Harry looked at Monty, raising an eyebrow.

“Dumbledore said he wrote them,” Monty said, “and since it was house-elf magic it wasn’t my fault.”

“That’s good,” Harry said. He looked at the barrier. It didn’t seem any different, but there was no way to tell. “Alright, here’s what we’ll do. Weasley, write a note for your parents telling

them we're taking the Knight Bus to Hogsmeade. Potter, write a letter to Professor McGonagall letting her know too."

Ron opened his mouth to protest, but Monty was already opening his trunk to get out parchment and a quill. There wasn't anything overtly magical in parchment, or quills, or even snowy owls in the middle of London, but it was still an odd sight for muggles.

"How will Professor McGonagall get it?" Monty asked.

Harry gave Hedwig a significant look, and she hooted.

"Oh, right," Monty said, blushing.

Harry looked his brother over. He was so recognizable. He needed a hat and sunglasses, that's what most celebrities did, so Harry thought. He was wearing hand-me-downs again, but someone had transfigured them to fit better, probably Mrs. Weasley. But the hair, the eyes, the glasses, all were distinctive.

Harry took off his hoodie. "You two done?"

"Yeah," Ron said, Monty nodding his agreement.

"Potter, since we're taking public transportation, wear this. Put the hood up and take your glasses off for now."

"Okay," Monty said, frowning. "I still have your—"

"Don't worry about it," Harry said, looking over at Ron. "Where's the car?"

They left the trolleys at the station and Harry helped the boys carry their ridiculously heavy trunks across the street. Ron put the note he had written under the wiper of an old Ford Anglia. Harry peeked through the window and smiled at the number of buttons that had been added to the console.

He led the two boys into an empty alley, drawing confused looks from both.

"Go on and let your owl out," Harry said, watching as Hedwig shook out her feathers then launched into the sky.

"Why are we in an alley?" Monty asked.

"I don't want to wave a wand around muggles," Harry explained. "They won't notice the bus, but they'll see *us*. Stand back a bit."

The boys shuffled behind him. "Where's your trunk?" Monty asked.

"In my pocket," Harry said, sticking his wand out like he was hailing a taxi. "Shrinking charm. You could charm your trunks lighter, you know. Or ask someone to do it for you."

"How come mum and dad never have?" Ron muttered. "I bet they think it *builds character*."

The Knight Bus exploded onto the scene, drawing a startled shriek from Ron. Monty gaped at the violently purple triple-decker bus, though it might have been him trying to actually see it.

Harry was a little surprised to see who was standing in the door to welcome them.

“Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. Just stick out your wand hand, step on board, and we can take you anywhere you want to go. My name is Louis Gage and I will be your conductor this morning.”

Louis yawned then blinked down at them. “Harry?”

“Hey Louis,” Harry said. “We need to get to Hogsmeade.”

“You missed the train?”

“Me and two second-years,” Harry said. “How much is it?”

“Eleven sickles, fifteen if you want hot chocolate. A galleon if you want biscuits too.”

Harry pulled out three galleons and passed them over. “Come on, you two.”

“A galleon?” Ron said. “But, I—”

“You don’t have to pay for us,” Monty protested, squinting at him.

“The school will pay me back,” Harry said. “Maybe. Just get on, don’t want to miss the Sorting.”

Louis levitated Monty and Ron’s trunks on. “Is that a Weasley and *Monty Potter*?” he whispered to Harry.

“I know,” Harry whispered back, cursing his bad luck that someone observant was the bus conductor. He watched the two boys bounce on one of the beds. “We couldn’t get on the platform, something blocked it off.”

“Strange,” Louis muttered.

“How much to keep this quiet?” Harry asked, resigned to parting with more of his ill-gotten gains.

Louis waved him off. “Don’t worry about it.”

Harry found a bed for himself, glancing at a tiny old wizard who was snoring, sound asleep.

“Hang on tight, kids,” Louis said, yawning again. “Mr. Prang, if you would please add Hogsmeade to the itinerary?”

The bus driver, a small, elderly wizard with the thickest glasses Harry had ever seen, grunted in acknowledgement, and Harry was thrown back as the bus took off.

His dad was right. The Knight Bus was abominable.

Harry tried to look out of a window, but it was a nauseating blur as the driver sped through obstacles and skipped around Britain. He couldn't tell where they were at all, and where they were changed in the blink of an eye. Monty and Ron were clinging on to their bedposts, and Harry was glad he'd thought to send Hedwig up ahead. No owl deserved to suffer the Knight Bus. He didn't bother reading *Break with a Banshee*, he'd probably be sick.

Louis brought over mugs of hot chocolate and a tray of biscuits, smiling and spelling their beds in place.

"You couldn't have done that sooner?" Ron asked between bites.

"Why didn't you ask?" Louis retorted, sipping his own mug of hot chocolate.

Harry nibbled on his caraway biscuit. It was quite tasty, and helped settle his stomach.

Thankfully, not many people chose to use the Knight Bus, hence the steep ticket. There were only a few stops to Hogsmeade, and they were let out hours before the train would arrive.

"See you around," Louis said. "Mr. Prang, if you would—"

The Knight Bus vanished, leaving Harry, Monty, and Ron at the open gates of Hogwarts.

"That was nice of them," Harry said. "You learned the Levitation Charm last year, right?"

"Yeah," Monty said, putting his glasses back on. He handed Harry back his hoodie.

"Levitate your trunks, unless you want to drag them all the way to the castle," Harry said.

"What's the point of learning magic if you don't use it?"

With that, Harry started for the castle.

It didn't take long for someone to come hurrying out of the castle towards them. Several someones.

"Mr. Potter!" Professor McGonagall called out. "We've just received your owl!"

"Are we in trouble?" Monty asked, looking up at Harry, his trunk floating at his side.

"We shouldn't be," Harry said. "It was my idea, so you two can just blame me."

"Ron's idea was to fly a car through London," Monty whispered to him, drawing a complaint from Ron.

Harry was bemused that the Head of Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Offices apparently misused muggle artifacts. What did Percy think of his dad straddling the line of legality?

Professor McGonagall drew herself up before them, the headmaster and Professor Snape at her side. Harry glanced at his dad, but he couldn't tell if he was upset or not.

“What were you three thinking?” Professor McGonagall demanded. “You should have stayed put! We would have sent someone to escort you to the school!”

“Excuse me, professor,” Harry said, getting her attention. “It was my idea to take the Knight Bus. It seemed like the best way to get here. I don’t think there are any laws stating we *must* take the Hogwarts Express, nor regulating which modes of transportation underage wizards may use.”

“Be that as it may,” the headmaster said, smiling at him. Harry didn’t trust it. “In the future, you may wish to wait for a response before taking matters into your own hands.”

His dad sighed. “Headmaster, riding that monstrosity is punishment enough. Must we prolong this?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “You boys do look green about the gills. It will be several hours until the Sorting Ceremony. Minerva, perhaps Monty and Ron can retire to their common room for now?”

McGonagall sighed. “Very well, follow me you two, and don’t dawdle! What a start to the year...”

“Thanks for helping us,” Monty said, nudging Ron.

“Yeah, thanks,” Ron said. “Merlin, I’m starving.”

Harry watched them trail after Professor McGonagall, then turned back to the headmaster and his dad. No, not his dad here. Professor Snape.

“Mr. Evans, if you could join me in my office,” the headmaster said. “I’d like to ask you a few questions about your unconventional journey.”

Harry could tell the headmaster wasn’t really asking him. “Of course, sir.”

They walked to the castle. Harry looked around the grounds, glad to be back despite the sense of foreboding. The grass was taller than he’d ever seen it, rustling in the gentle breeze. The Black Lake glittered at him, and he could see the shadow of the Giant Squid lurking just beneath its surface. The Forbidden Forest was quiet as a held breath, waiting for the school’s residents to return. Smoke drifted from the chimney of Hagrid’s cabin, and he saw the man and his massive boarhound idling away on his porch, watching over the herd of thestrals and the carriages they would soon be hitched to.

The headmaster was silent as they climbed the steps leading into the castle, and as they walked up several flights of stairs and through corridors to reach a hideous gargoyle. The gargoyle hopped to the side seemingly of its own volition. The wall behind it parted, revealing a spiral staircase. Harry joined the headmaster and Professor Snape on it, and it began moving upward.

Harry closed his eyes, feeling a little nauseated. After some time the stairs finally shuddered to a stop. At the top was an oak door, with a polished brass griffin door knocker. Harry

frowned at it. He knew the headmaster had been in Gryffindor, but he was the headmaster of the entire school. It was a bit on the nose.

The door opened on its own, possibly responding to the headmaster's presence. Harry had never been in the headmaster's office, and he had never planned to be. He knew it had to be because he had shown up with Monty Potter, but he couldn't regret what had happened. His brother could have been abandoned at Kings Cross, vulnerable to whoever or whatever had barred his access to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. His reasoning for being there too was starting to seem a little thin. A twelve-year-old was a lot easier to fool than one of the most powerful wizards in history.

Harry stepped into the office, momentarily overwhelmed. It was a large, circular room, which confirmed it was in one of the towers. The walls were lined with packed bookshelves, large windows looking over the grounds, and portraits of previous headmasters and headmistresses. There were tables throughout the room, covered in all sorts of strange devices, making little noises, emitting sparks and smoke. Harry couldn't tell if it was decoration, or if the things had some utility. He'd never seen anything of the like. There was a large desk with clawed feet—griffin feet—behind which the headmaster was soon sitting. The Sorting Hat was there too, and Harry hoped it was enchanted to keep whatever it stripped from their minds to itself. If not, well, he was fucked.

There was also an actual phoenix, as big as a swan, blazing scarlet and gold feathers, staring at him with inky black eyes. The phoenix let out a few sweet notes, which immediately made Harry feel lighter.

"His name is Fawkes. Fascinating, isn't he?" the headmaster said warmly. "Though perhaps not so much as your finned companion?"

It was a rather gauche way for the headmaster to indirectly compliment himself, Harry thought. Phoenixes were very virtuous creatures, and for one to attach to a person implied a sort of worthiness.

"I don't know if Frankie is immortal," Harry said, seeing no point in lying about still having a babelfish around. He knew Dumbledore was a legilimens, Professor Snape had told him. Harry had wanted to start practicing occlumency over the summer, but it was a big thing to ask, letting someone into your mind. "But I like her."

Dumbledore nodded sagely. "Please have a seat, Mr. Evans."

Harry sat down across from the headmaster, aware that Professor Snape remained standing.

"So, Mr. Evans," the headmaster said—Harry wondered why he was *Mr. Evans* but his brother was Monty and Ron was Ron—"could you tell me what happened today at Kings Cross?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Harry said. "I was on my way to the platform, and I saw Potter and Weasley trying to get through the barrier, but it looked like they ran into a wall. We waited around to see if anyone was able to get out, but after a while I suggested we leave a note for Weasley's parents and owl the school."

“I take it you were running late?” Dumbledore asked, his aged blue eyes completely guileless.

“It takes a while to get from where I live to London,” Harry said, “and the trains are usually late.”

“Are you a fan of Lockhart?” Dumbledore asked.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Your book,” he said, nodding at the book Harry was still carrying. He’d forgotten all about it.

“Oh, no,” he said. “His books are overpriced pabulum.”

“How was your holiday?” Dumbledore asked, apropos of nothing.

“It was fine,” Harry said, frowning. “I’m sorry, I’m not sure why I’m here.”

“Strange, isn’t it,” the headmaster said lightly, “that the barrier to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ should close just as Monty Potter was attempting to pass through?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “Hold on, do you think *I* did something?”

“Oh, no, I doubt that, Mr. Evans,” the headmaster said. “That barrier has been enchanted for well over a century! I don’t believe a fourth-year student, even one as bright as yourself, is capable of disenchanting it.”

“That’s what I thought,” Harry said slowly. “It was odd it stopped working right when Potter tried to get through. Like a trap or something.”

Dumbledore nodded encouragingly. “Indeed, my boy. Well, Severus—”

“You’ve finally remembered I’m here,” Snape drawled. “How magnanimous of you, headmaster.”

The headmaster laughed a little. “If you could see Mr. Evans to his common room, that would be lovely.”

“As you wish,” Snape said, turning his gaze onto Harry. Harry tried not to flinch. “Evans, with me.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, standing. “It was nice speaking with you, headmaster.”

“Likewise,” Dumbledore said.

Harry followed Professor Snape out of the office and back down the staircase. They were silent as they walked down to the dungeons, passing portraits and a few ghosts who greeted them. They passed the wall hiding the Slytherin Dungeon, continuing to Snape’s office. Snape cast a few spells and sat down at his desk.

“Cognitive dissonance,” Professor Snape said. “A major obstacle for an occlumens. Sit down, Evans.”

Harry sat down.

“Explain to me why you were *lying in wait* for Potter,” Snape said, leaning forward. “You foolish boy! Have I not made it clear that you are *not* to draw attention to yourself?”

Harry met Professor Snape’s eyes. “I know, I’m sorry. I did it last year because...you know.”

“*The trains are usually late*,” Snape said sourly.

“It’s *technically* true.”

Professor Snape pinched the bridge of his nose.

“It’s a good thing I was there,” Harry said defensively. “Ron’s idea was to fly his dad’s car through London.”

“Weasley,” Snape corrected.

“I bet it was that house-elf,” Harry said, rubbing his arms. It was much colder in the dungeons. He needed to change into his school robes. “I thought he might be, I don’t know, attacked or something.”

Snape watched him silently, and Harry waited, apprehensive.

“I cannot say you made the wrong decision,” Snape finally said. “You likely made the best one given the situation. However, I am...not pleased that such a decision had to be made at all.”

“He’s...I have to look after him,” Harry said, gripping his trousers.

“Our entire world is looking after that boy,” Snape said.

“Not well enough.”

Snape sighed. “I’m sure the headmaster will avail himself of my expertise to ensure Potter makes his train on time.”

“It’s not his fault,” Harry said. “Why do you—”

“What?” Professor Snape asked. His *dad* asked.

Harry shook his head.

“You’re not...” his dad trailed off. “You are allowed to ask me any questions you wish.”

Harry met his dad’s eyes, not entirely trusting he was being sincere. Then again, if his dad didn’t want to answer something, he could just say so.

“I know you must have hated his father,” Harry finally said, watching his dad’s reaction. “I know he sort of looks like him. But he’s never even *met* him. I don’t think he even knew his parents’ names until last year.”

His dad’s eyebrows drew down in consternation. “I cannot suddenly change my behavior towards the boy. Given your encounter in June.”

Harry was starting to feel sick again. “He’s coming back, isn’t he?”

“The headmaster believes it is only a matter of time. And I have my role to play.”

Harry nodded, not knowing what to say. What role? For who?

“You should go to your dormitory,” his dad said. “I shall see you at the Sorting Ceremony.”

“Okay,” Harry said, standing. He grinned, suddenly remembering something. “Do you think the school could reimburse me for the Knight Bus? I spent three galleons.”

His dad shook his head, smirking. “Get out of my office.”

Setting Precedents

Chapter Summary

September 1992

Harry didn't go to the Great Hall early, instead staying in the Slytherin common room until the last possible moment. He hadn't wanted to sit there with just him at the Slytherin table, the professors at the head table, and his brother at Gryffindor. Monty would have probably been friendly. What a disaster that would have been.

He had plenty of time to think about the consequences of the headmaster discovering his parentage. Harry knew Voldemort absolutely should not. His dad had said the attempted murder of his infant brother was due to something about their mother. He would be killed, or used against Monty. Neither option was ideal.

Voldemort was easier to understand, if only for his straightforward goals. Kill muggles, conquer the world. Simplistic, almost. Dumbledore was an unknown. That his mother had hidden him from all actors in the war—the Ministry, Voldemort, Dumbledore—was significant. That his dad didn't want Dumbledore to know was significant. Associating with Monty, in any capacity, had put him on Dumbledore's radar. He had to take a step back.

How would Monty react? His stomach soured at the thought.

Harry's head was a mess when he finally left the dungeon, joining the mob of students entering the Great Hall fresh out of the carriages. He thought he'd gone unnoticed, until someone grabbed him and pulled him into a hug.

"Where the fuck were you?" Astrid demanded, holding him at arm's length so as to better shake him. "We looked all over the train!"

"I missed it," Harry said, smiling apologetically. "I ended up taking the Knight Bus."

Their other friends ringed them, and Harry felt a flush of guilt at their relief and obvious worry.

"Sorry," he added ineffectually.

"I told you he was fine," Adrian said, punching his arm affably. "Gave them a scare, mate."

His *being late* excuse wasn't bought by everyone. Harry was punctual to a fault, and it wasn't a stretch to work out that something had happened to *make* him late. There was a high probability Monty and Ron would spread what happened throughout Gryffindor, which was as good as the whole school knowing.

They followed the crowd into the Great Hall. He spotted Professor Snape at the head table, silently seething next to a grinning Lockhart. On Snape's other side was the new Muggle Studies teacher, a chubby woman with dishwater blonde hair, who smiled like she was actually happy to be there and not hoping to make the front page.

"I heard Potter was missing too," Astrid whispered conspiratorially. "The prefects were running up and down the train corridor, checking all the compartments. And that girl he's always with."

"Hmm," Harry said, sitting down. The Great Hall thrummed with excitement. Harry failed to resonate with it. He avoided looking at the Gryffindor table, glad for the barriers of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. The hours of waiting had preyed on his anxiety, and he just wanted the day to be over.

"Diggory's looking."

His head snapped up. That was right, he was meant to have shared a compartment with Cedric. He spotted him easily among his fellow Hufflepuffs, a concerned expression marring his increasingly handsome face. Harry smiled at him and mouthed *later*. Cedric was soon occluded by the Fat Friar and other passing ghosts, making their way to scare the incoming first-years. It seemed to be one of the few constants the Hogwarts ghosts had, this yearly tradition. Hundreds of years drifting through an old castle. At least it wasn't an abandoned muggle castle, the ghosts had more entertainment than their own forlorn company. He imagined the specter of his mum floating around Godric's Hollow, eternally tied to that place. Would Monty have still gone to live with their relatives? Would she have told anyone about him? He'd never gone to her grave. He wasn't even sure there had been a funeral. It might not have been safe, so soon after the war had ended, Death Eaters still on the run, fleeing from the fallout of the unforeseen defeat of their lord.

The doors to the antechamber opened, and Professor McGonagall marched in, trailed by first-years looking around nervously. Harry listened to the Sorting Hat extol the virtues of each house, then clapped along with everyone else for each new member. He caught only a few names. A vibrating Colin Creevey for Gryffindor, an oddly sweaty Ethan Harper for Slytherin, a dreamy Luna Lovegood for Ravenclaw, imperious Bridget Pritchard for Slytherin, and Ginevra Weasley, who surprised no one when she joined her brothers in Gryffindor. The new students kept looking at Monty, though they weren't the only ones who hadn't built an immunity to him.

The headmaster stood to address them all.

"Welcome to another year at Hogwarts!" he proclaimed, smiling down on them. "Before we all tuck in, I would like to introduce two new members of the staff. First, a wizard who needs no introduction, Gilderoy Lockhart!"

The din in the Great Hall rose to a thunderous roar as Lockhart stood and bowed to each table, his waves of hair shining like gold.

"I may not need an introduction, headmaster," Lockhart said, blinding them all with his smile, "but I certainly enjoy one! There is no greater honor than to walk these hallowed halls,

to impart my wisdom to future generations of witches and wizards. You see, I was once a student here...”

Professor Snape sat like a boulder next to Lockhart, staring straight ahead. Harry didn't envy his proximity to Lockhart. Gilderoy Lockhart was a generically handsome and charismatic man, Harry understood the conventional appeal. He was also blatantly narcissistic, and it boggled the mind why so few seemed to recognize this.

“Thank you, Gilderoy,” the headmaster said after a while. A long while. “And now, please welcome our new Muggle Studies professor, Charity Burbage!”

Harry glanced at their own Charity, who was ignoring the proceedings and scribbling frantically in a notebook. Oddly, Marcus Flint, who was sitting next to Charity, was doing the same.

The headmaster introduced the new prefects, and the new head boy and head girl. Finally, the feast began. Harry had barely popped his retainers out when Charity and Marcus plopped down next to him and Astrid.

“Evans, good to see you,” Charity said in a low voice. “We got gobstones business to discuss.”

“Can it wait until after the feast?” Harry asked.

“I've done up the practice schedule,” she said, ignoring him. “I've got NEWTs, so I've had to juggle some things around.”

She pushed her notebook towards him, and Harry took a look.

The schedule was exactly the same as the year before, except Charity had added little stars next to some of the days.

“What's that mean?” Harry asked.

“Those are days you're in charge of training,” she said matter-of-factly. “You're the co-captain, Evans. It's time to step up.”

Charity slapped him on the back and stood, walking back to her own seat. Harry wasn't sure what to think about his sudden promotion. He didn't seem to have a choice about it. He turned to tell Astrid about it, but saw she had gone very still, a strange expression on her face. Marcus had got up too, and Harry saw he had the quidditch captain's badge.

“What's wrong?” Harry asked quietly. “Is he making you try out again?”

Astrid nodded her head jerkily, then turned to look down the other end of the table, where the lower years sat.

“Tomorrow morning,” she said. “Before breakfast.”

“That’s mad,” Terence said, glancing at Marcus, who was studiously ignoring them. “First day of classes?”

“He says it’s that or we’re off the team,” Astrid said. “We’ve got a team sponsor now, it’s part of their conditions for getting the team new brooms.”

“Who?” Harry asked. He’d never heard of a school team being sponsored. Why now?

Astrid’s expression hardened. “Lucius Malfoy.”

Harry’s dormitory was empty by the time he woke up. The festive atmosphere of the Welcoming Feast hadn’t quite gripped their friend group after Astrid’s revelation, and the grating laughter of Draco Malfoy and his hangers-on didn’t help. Since he couldn’t get into the girls’ dormitory to wake his friends (he hoped), and didn’t want to linger in the common room, he went to breakfast early.

The Great Hall was practically dead, and the same nervous energy that had plagued Harry the day before settled around him like a shroud. He’d brought *Break with a Banshee* with him, recalling Percy’s letter and the general wisdom of reading course books one would likely be tested on. Lockhart’s books presented an interesting dilemma. Harry didn’t want to read them. It was possibly the first time he’d been bored by literature originating from the magical world. He suspected the only entertainment he’d get out of Lockhart’s novels would be slugging them off to his friends, only half of whom would be receptive to it.

Just as his eyes began to glaze over, someone sat down next to him.

“Good morning,” Cedric said, smiling at him. “You’re up bright and early.”

Harry went a little pink cheeked, surprised at the boldness of Cedric sitting at the Slytherin table. True, there were only a few other students in the Great Hall, but it was rather forward.

“I was feeling restless,” he said, holding his book like a shield. “Sorry about the train, I missed it.”

“Yeah, some people overheard Monty Potter talking about it,” Cedric said. “Something about the barrier being shut down?”

Harry shrugged, a little irritated that it hadn’t even been a full twelve hours since the rest of the school had arrived. Monty must have been talking about it during the feast, and there were plenty of people interested in listening in to his conversations. He hoped Cedric didn’t number among them.

“It worked out in the end,” Harry said. “How was the train ride?”

He and Cedric chatted as the Great Hall slowly filled up. Soon Cedric was called away by his Hufflepuff friends, and Harry was joined by Jasmine and Phoebe.

“Where’s Astrid?” he asked as they sat down.

“She said she’s not hungry,” Phoebe said, slathering a crumpet with jam.

“That’s odd,” Harry said, looking around for his other friends. He spotted Adrian and Cassius, but Terence was missing. “The try out must have gone poorly.”

“How could it?” Jasmine said. “Astrid’s brilliant. Viridia said she’s the best keeper the team’s had in years.”

Harry had kept an eye on the entrance hall, and saw Draco Malfoy strutting in next to Marcus Flint.

Adrian dropped onto the bench across from him. “Shit’s fucked,” he announced.

Jasmine wrinkled her nose. “It’s half seven, must you?”

“Yeah,” Adrian said, smirking. It faded quickly. “Astrid’s been put back on reserve, Ter and Cas too. I’m still on.”

“What?” Harry asked dumbly, glancing at where Marcus and Draco sat together. He recognized the beaters from last year, Lucian Bole and Peregrine Derrick, along with two other upper year boys.

“Montague’s the other chaser,” Adrian continued. “And Bletchley’s keeper.”

They all stared at him, except Cassius who was cutting his fried egg with unnerving severity.

Adrian leaned forward, drawing them closer. “Get this. Malfoy’s made seeker. They had a seeker’s match, he’s got a Nimbus Two Thousand and One. Blagged Terry, nearly made him crash. His *father*,” he said with a mocking twist, “he bought the whole team new brooms.”

Harry felt a wave of disgust. Blagging was a foul where someone grabbed another’s broom, which had a high chance of unseating one or both players. It could be fatal.

“He bought his way onto the team,” Phoebe said, her eyes flashing dangerously. “Quidditch is *everything* to Astrid!”

“Miles Bletchley is a boorish pillock,” Cassius said, still dissecting his food with surgical precision. “He had fewer saves than Astrid. She is clearly the better keeper. And yet, money talks.”

“Why does a school team need Two Thousand and Ones?” Jasmine asked. “Weren’t those just released? Terence had that magazine of his...five hundred galleons, right? Merlin...”

“Potter’s got a Two Thousand,” Harry reluctantly pointed out. “There’s a precedent now. McGonagall really bollocksed that one.”

“Good for us, though,” Adrian said. “Better brooms.”

“You’re only saying that because you’re still on the team,” Phoebe said disdainfully.

“Can he really do that?” Jasmine asked, glancing at the head table. “Buy the whole team brooms? That means anyone with a wealthy parent could get on a team.”

Harry looked at Professor Snape, who was ignoring a chatty Lockhart. Had he known that Lucius Malfoy planned to buy the team new brooms to secure his son’s position?

Cassius shook his head. “The broom doesn’t make the player. It’s just a tool. Look at Flint. Does he appear pleased at having an ambulatory egg for a keeper? He’s in the unenviable position of having to cater to Draco Malfoy and his father.”

There *was* something strained about Marcus’ smile. Could he have turned down brand new, top of the line brooms? Would any team captain?

Harry looked at Professor Snape again. Snape knew most of his friends were on the team, and that they hoped to get on the main team now that some of the players had graduated. Harry had talked about it over summer. The lack of warning felt like a betrayal, but Harry knew his own feelings on the matter paled in comparison to whatever Astrid was going through.

He thought back on their interactions with Draco Malfoy the past year, Astrid getting in his face, blaming the boy for their loss against Gryffindor. The meeting in Borgin and Burkes. There was something pointed about the team selection. How much of it was dictated by the Malfoys?

Snape eventually came around with their class schedules, pausing when he reached their group.

“Where are Mr. Higgs and Miss Urquhart?” he asked.

“In mourning, I’d imagine,” Harry muttered.

“What was that, Mr. Evans?” Snape asked, giving him a piercing look.

“I can take their schedules to them, sir,” Harry offered. Maybe he could talk to Snape about it later.

Snape watched him for a moment, then handed the schedules over. “Inform your peers that being late on the first day is generally frowned upon. It doesn’t set a good *precedent*.”

Snape moved on before Harry could reply. There wasn’t really a response he *could* make, and besides, the morning owls had begun arriving.

Harry now had his own *Daily Prophet* subscription, another birthday gift which his dad had dismissed as pocket change. It was a step up from nicking forgotten copies from upper years. The tawny delivery owl took some of his bacon as a tip and flew off, leaving the paper behind. Harry unrolled it and was confronted with a picture of Arthur Weasley, smiling

warmly at the camera and holding a scroll of parchment so long that extended beyond the frame.

“*Muggle Protection Act*,” Phoebe read over his shoulder. “What’s that?”

“Meant to protect muggles, isn’t it?” Adrian said. “Da’s been going on about it all summer. He was at the first reading in the ’Gamot.”

Harry did not like the Wizengamot. Its membership was comprised of hereditary peers, people who had inherited their positions through the centuries, people appointed by the Minister, and people internally elected by extant members. It was a lifetime appointment, and a wholly undemocratic institution. It had been *entirely* hereditary until Voldemort’s defeat. Realizing how easily their oldest institution had been subverted, the Ministry had quickly reorganized.

That Arthur Weasley had presented a bill to that rarefied body was impressive, but Harry suspected he’d traded heavily on his pureblood heritage. He knew one of Mr. Weasley’s in-laws, the dowager Muriel Prewett, was on the Wizengamot. The Malfoys, hilariously, weren’t. Their only connection would have been through the Black family, and anyone with the name was dead, disinherited, or in Azkaban.

Harry scanned the article, and was disappointed to see it didn’t have the text of the bill anywhere. He knew Mr. Weasley headed the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office. The article mentioned stricter regulations and commensurate punishments, particularly for acts of muggle baiting, but lacked specifics. Without knowing the language of the proposed law, Harry couldn’t form much of an opinion. *Muggle protection* certainly sounded good, but based on Adrian’s tone it had its dissenters. He put the paper away for later. Their first class, double History of Magic, was starting soon.

“So,” Phoebe said as they walked back to the dungeon for their school things. “What was it like on the Knight Bus?”

Gildeory Lockhart swept into the room in a flurry of shimmering turquoise robes, causing more corneal damage with his smile, echoed by the portraits featured on the covers of his books stacked on every desk. Harry had transfigured the covers of his own Lockhart books to solid colors. All the winking was creepy.

After Lockhart introduced himself—*Witch Weekly*’s Most Charming Smile was frankly more impressive than an Order of Merlin, Third Class; they’d handed those out like sweets after the war—he gave them a quiz. The first question asked them to name Lockhart’s favorite color.

Harry stared at his paper, ignoring the eerie giggling coming from Phoebe’s direction. He glanced up at Lockhart, who was busy fiddling with his hair in front of a conjured mirror.

Harry took out his wand and whispered, “*Geminio*,” making a copy of the quiz. He put the original in his bag, and got out a book to read.

When time was almost up, he used a switching spell with either Fred or George Weasley, it was hard to tell from the back and he couldn’t trust the name on the paper. Forgie Ferrety? He didn’t even look at what nonsense had been scribbled in, scraping off the name and writing in his own.

The rest of the lesson was Lockhart regaling them with the tale of his battle with the Bandon Banshee, which he implored a rather angry Astrid to help him reenact. It was a masterful performance, involving a lot of Astrid screaming at and screaming over Lockhart as he tried to get her to stop. He’d dropped his wand.

“Useless wanker,” Adrian muttered.

“I hope she feels better after that,” Harry said, checking his watch. “Another waste of a year. I bet if I asked him for a syllabus he’d give me his bibliography. Signed.”

“His signature isn’t worth that much,” Cassius said. He’d also got a book out to read. Harry glanced at the cover. “He’s flooded the market.”

“What are you reading about xylomancy for?” Harry asked. “That’s divination with wood, yeah?”

“You can learn a lot from someone’s furnishings,” Cassius said, turning a page.

“What? *Lovely credenza, looks like it’s terminal?*”

“Not quite,” Cassius said, giving him a faint smile.

Harry was glad it wasn’t a double lesson. By the time the bell rang it certainly felt like it had been.

“What a shite first day,” he said during lunch, rolling his eyes at Adrian’s exaggerated gasp.

“And it’s not even over yet,” Astrid said bitterly. Her eyes were red and puffy, though Harry knew Jasmine and Phoebe had tried some covert cosmetic charms.

“Are you at least allowed to practice with the team?” he asked.

“I’d bloody well like to see them stop me,” she said. “Besides, I don’t need to be on a team to play quidditch. We can play on our own.”

Terence jumped up as if kicked. “Yeah, but the pitch is usually booked out by the teams. Anyway, they’ll want to train with us. What’s the point of a reserve team otherwise? They

can run drills all they want, they still need to be tested.”

“Positive thinking!” Phoebe said, smiling to demonstrate her point.

“*Cogito, ergo sum*,” Harry said.

“Yeah, that,” Phoebe said happily. “*Je pense, donc je suis*.”

“What is happening?” Jasmine asked, looking warily at Phoebe and Harry.

“It’s from Arithmancy,” Terence said. “Descartes.”

“That means nothing to me.”

“Well,” Harry said, standing up. “It’s our next class.”

“Sucks to be you,” Adrian said, plowing through a steak and kidney pie.

Harry left the Great Hall with Phoebe and Terence. They soon found their path to the Arithmancy classroom blocked by a crowd.

“Everyone line up!” someone shouted. “Monty Potter’s giving out signed photos!”

Harry stopped in his tracks. “This I’ve got to see.”

“I think that was Malfoy,” Phoebe said, standing on her tiptoes to try to see over the crowd.

“Need a boost?” Harry asked.

“Oh, hush,” she said. “Terence?”

“Yeah,” Terence said. He was the tallest of them. “Some Gryffindor firstie’s got a camera. Lockhart’s there too.”

The crowd parted, and Lockhart marched past, an arm over Monty’s shoulders like a yoke. Monty looked absolutely miserable. Harry wondered what the punishment would be for garrotting a teacher, and was extremely tempted to cast a tripping hex on Lockhart while he was on the stairs. Monty might have got hurt as well, so he held back.

He hardly paid attention in Arithmancy. It was just a review of the previous year’s material, and the actual mathematics was arithmetic he’d learned while barely out of nappies. He was already far ahead in Arithmancy, working on NEWT-level spell and potion analysis. As such, it was one of his easiest classes, and it gave Harry plenty of time to think.

Severus had been only mildly surprised to see his son in his office shortly after dinner. He had expected some complaint about the rubbish happening with the quidditch team. Lucius Malfoy was someone whose good graces one wanted to stay in. If the Dark Lord returned, Severus couldn't afford to be at odds with either the man or his wife, nor alienate their only child. If Draco Malfoy wanted to be on the team, Draco Malfoy would be on the team. Seven expensive brooms was nothing to turn one's nose up at either. The impact it had on Harry's friends was unfortunate, but unavoidable, though why Montague and Bletchley were replacing Warrington and Urquhart, he didn't know. Severus suspected it had to do with the animosity towards Draco Malfoy the previous year. A grudge.

But it wasn't quidditch Harry wanted to talk about. No, it was that buffoon Gilderoy Lockhart.

Severus picked up the so-called quiz Harry had brought to him. Sixty questions about Lockhart. Students made to prance about, recreating scenes from Lockhart's books. Lockhart grabbing the Boy Who Lived and parading him through the corridors.

His mouth twisted in distaste, imagining his son in Potter's place. It helped him be more sympathetic towards Potter's plight, not least because it was entirely possible that it could have been his son in that role. He could have consigned his own child to death.

Severus set down the paper lest he immolate it. It was beyond the pale the headmaster had hired someone like Lockhart. Someone who manhandled a child to bolster his own vanity.

Annoyed at how troublesome the first day of classes had become, Severus picked up the odious paper again and left his office. He needed to speak with the headmaster.

Muddy

Chapter Summary

September 1992

Harry almost missed a step when he walked into Defense on Friday. It was the end of the first week, their second Defense class of the year, and Albus Dumbledore was sitting in a plush, plum-colored armchair.

Lockhart smiled at them like his life depended on it. It was glorious.

“Welcome,” Lockhart said with dimmed enthusiasm. “Welcome, everyone. So lovely to see you all again. The headmaster will be joining us for this lesson—”

“Why?” Fred and George asked.

“Ah, yes, well, you see,” Lockhart said. “Professor Dumbledore tells me he used to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts! Returning to the old stomping grounds. Isn't that right, headmaster?”

Dumbledore smiled blandly at them. “The field has had some developments since I last taught,” he said.

“Jolly good,” Lockhart said, clearing his throat. He gestured to the ornate calligraphy on the chalkboard behind him. “So, ah, as you can see, I’ve written some things on the board. This is your fourth year, so we will be covering—” Lockhart checked over his shoulder “—cannibalistic creatures, curses, and countercurses. The three Cs, as I like to call them!”

“Isn't that five Cs?” Phoebe whispered, counting on her fingers.

Harry held back a smile as he took notes. He didn’t really think anything would come of telling on Lockhart, certainly nothing immediate. Professor Snape must have really lit into the headmaster, and the old man had come down from his tower to make sure Lockhart did his job. Whether Lockhart was *capable* of doing it remained to be seen.

“So, as I’ve said, these first few classes we’ll focus on ghouls—”

“We’ve got a ghoul in our attic,” George said.

“Mum feeds him chicken,” Fred added.

“Excellent,” Lockhart said, wiping his forehead with a lilac-colored handkerchief. “You’ve got a wonderful foundation then. Now, let’s see...yes, if you could all please turn to chapter

one of *Gadding with Ghouls*. I've written a very thorough description of your common ghoul..."

Harry was a bit let down as Lockhart found his stride.

"This is, of course, based on the infamous Ghoul of Gloucester, which, as it turned out, was not the *only* ghoul in Gloucester! Funny story, that. You see..."

There was a tension in the common room Friday evening, if you looked for it.

Most of Harry's fellow Slytherins were elated by the short first week, excited for the weekend, still riding the lofty currents of being back at Hogwarts. No parents, no chores, free to do magic. There were classes, of course, and homework, prefects and teachers, but it was an excellent trade off for *magic*.

There was a high-pitched squeal from the couches near the main fire. It was Pansy Parkinson, fawning as Draco Malfoy held court over some of the lower years. He not only had the Malfoy name, but he was the new team seeker, and only a second-year. Those with memories superior to that of a goldfish would recall that Terence Higgs had also been a second-year seeker on the team, and a third-year, and would have been a fourth-year had certain palms not been greased.

Three days wasn't enough for Harry and his friends to recover from the rigged try outs. He was surprised Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle hadn't been maneuvered onto the team too, though perhaps the comparative bulk and experience of the current fifth-year beaters had been convincing. The fastest brooms in the world wouldn't help bad aim.

Marcus Flint was talking to the rest of the team, sans Draco. Graham Montague was with them, nodding along to whatever Marcus was saying. The new team composition had been dissected to death by Harry's friends. Graham made sense as a chaser on the main team. He had been on reserve, but was barred from playing the past year due to poor grades. A few discreet questions had ascertained that he *had* brought his grades up. Miles Bletchley, however, was a third-year who had underperformed. It wasn't Miles being on the team, but Astrid *not* being on the team. The little victorious looks from Draco all but confirmed his interference. Astrid, Terence, and Cassius had been traded for posh brooms.

The first team practice was early the next morning. Astrid had asked Harry to come along, and he had readily agreed. He was slightly concerned he'd been conscripted onto the reserve team, and Astrid was rounding them up to challenge the main team for dominance. Harry wasn't even sure which position he'd play. Beater?

They were attempting to pass a normal Friday evening. Cassius was still reading about xylomancy, occasionally scrutinizing the furniture in the room. Adrian and Terence were playing Exploding Snap. Phoebe was at Frog Choir practice; she'd got a painted chorus frog

from her grandmother over the summer and had been over the moon showing the noisy little amphibian off. Astrid had her quidditch gear spread out around her, and was meticulously taking apart and cleaning the leather pieces. Helmet, pauldrons, greaves, gloves. The reflection off her goggles could start a fire, and Astrid had the look of a pyromaniac before a conflagration.

Harry and Jasmine had less violent preoccupations than their friends. As co-captain, Harry had been tasked with the unending search for fresh meat to sacrifice on the gobstones altar. That they had an actual altar in their unauthorized practice room, featuring Harry's grandmother and greatest gobstones player Hogwarts had seen until Harry himself, made sacrifice a very real possibility. He wouldn't put it past Charity, who was thankfully off on her prefect rounds.

Hook them early, she had said. So Harry had asked Killian Avery and Tracey Davis to play a game in the common room. Vince kept looking over at them, but Draco had his claws sunk in. While Killian and Tracey showed off their skills and created a bit of a mess, Harry was working with Jasmine to make an attractive sign-up poster. It was mostly Jasmine, since she was in both the Art and Charms clubs, but she didn't mind taking on the bulk of the work. She had lit up when Harry outlined what he wanted, something a little more eye catching than tacked up parchment.

It was a gobstone, a bottle-washer filled with a noxious liquid, rolling at the viewer and squirting, ink spreading out across the paper.

"I bet there's a way to really make it squirt," Harry said, drawing a choked noise from Adrian, who had drifted over to watch.

"You play a vulgar game, Harry," Jasmine said flatly. "That'd probably put people off. The whole getting-gross-things-sprayed-in-your-face thing is why people don't like gobstones."

Adrian chuckled. "Bit masochistic, gobstones. Something you want to tell us, Haz?"

"It's only masochistic if you play to lose," Harry said absently, wondering if he could get the poster to spray people who *didn't* sign up.

"You're more of a spectator, Adrian," Jasmine said, smiling sweetly at him.

"Yeah, I like to watch," Adrian said lightly, ducking under a vambrace thrown by Astrid. "You like your birthday present?" he asked Harry with a nudge.

Harry scowled at the reminder of the magazine and its fiery fate. "Sort of dropped me in it."

"Sorry, mate," Adrian said with a wince. "Hope it wasn't too bad?"

"A warning next time would be nice," Harry said, rubbing his nose to hide his blush.

Adrian cackled. Astrid shut him up by throwing a boot at his face.

“Good morning, Severus!”

Severus was not used to being called his given name, particularly by someone he didn’t know. He looked over at Charity Burbage, who had taken the seat next to him at the head table.

“Bit quiet this morning,” she said, pouring a prodigious amount of sugar into her tea. Watching it made his teeth hurt.

“It *is* a weekend, Professor Burbage,” Severus said, trying to establish some professional distance. It was no use.

“Charity is fine,” she said with a rosy-cheeked smile. “Strange working with people who used to be my professors.”

Severus sighed. At least it wasn’t Lockhart harassing him. “Believe me, I know. Just wait until McGonagall starts asking you to call her Minerva.”

Burbage made a moue of distaste, and the milk she was trying to add to her tea-flavored sugar splashed onto the table. She tutted and vanished it with a wave of her hand. Severus was very mildly impressed.

“I wonder where they’re running off to,” she said.

Severus followed her gaze, and saw Harry and a few other Slytherins leaving the table.

“Quidditch practice, I imagine,” he said, given the entire quidditch team made up the majority of the group.

Burbage frowned. “That’s odd. McGonerva said the Gryffindor team had the pitch booked.”

McGonerva? Severus ignored the bizarre portmanteau. “Is that so?” he said, turning back to his food.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “The house rivalry was one thing I didn’t miss about Hogwarts. *So* glad to see it’s alive and well.”

Severus took a bite of corned beef hash as if he hadn’t been a main architect of said rivalry during his own school days. Old habits and all that.

In the stands of the quidditch pitch, Harry was sitting rather awkwardly between Phoebe and Jasmine, watching the Gryffindor team fly around. Monty was caught up in a race with Fred and George, easily oustripping their Cleansweeps. A tiny Gryffindor first-year, Colin

Creevey, was incessantly snapping pictures. Monty's friends Ron and Hermione were there too, and Harry avoided looking at them. They had sat in the Gryffindor stands to throw them off.

"We should have brought food like them," Phoebe said, gesturing to the actual Gryffindors. Ron and Hermione were eating toast and marmalade off a tray from the Great Hall.

"Oh, there they are," Jasmine said, pointing to the Slytherin team approaching. With the reserve players, it was nearly twice the size of the Gryffindor team, though Harry's friends hung in the back. They were also the only ones without Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones, excepting Adrian.

The Gryffindor captain, Oliver Wood, almost crashed getting to the ground. The rest of the Gryffindor team landed around him.

"Flint!" he shouted. "This is our practice time!"

"Drama," Phoebe said in sing-song.

"Plenty of room for all of us, Wood," Marcus called out, smiling in a nasty way. Harry didn't know Marcus well, given he was a seventh-year, but he thought he was acting particularly arsey.

The two teams lined up to face each other, and Phoebe shook him excitedly.

"I booked the field," Wood said angrily. "I booked it!"

Marcus fished around his robes and pulled out a roll of parchment. "I've got a note here, specially signed by Professor Snape. *I, Professor S. Snape, give the Slytherin team permission to practice today on the Quidditch field owing to the need to train their new seeker.*"

Harry had initially been surprised to see the Gryffindor team come onto the pitch, but assumed they'd only booked a few hours that day. He hadn't known about any special permission granted by Snape. What was he thinking?

"You've got a new seeker?" Wood said, looking around. "Higgs is right there!"

"He's on reserve now," Draco said, stepping forward.

"Malfoy?" Monty said incredulously.

"You're Lucius Malfoy's son?" one of the Weasley twins asked.

"Funny you should mention Draco's father," Marcus said, smiling broadly.

Draco? Phoebe mouthed. Harry shook his head, just as confused by Marcus' familiarity.

"He must be ingratiating himself," he muttered, watching as those who had them held out their new brooms. He saw Monty's two friends get up and hurry onto the pitch. "We best get

down there too.”

Harry and his friends followed quickly after, gravitating towards the Slytherin team as lines had been clearly drawn.

Astrid was in high dudgeon. She likely hadn’t anticipated their practice session turning into a prick-measuring contest. Adrian liked the *drama*, as Phoebe had put it, Cassius had brought his book with him and was frowning at his broom, while Terence was shifting uncomfortably, looking at the sky.

“You could raffle off those Cleansweep Fives,” Draco was saying to a seething Ron. “I expect a museum would bid for them!”

Most of the Slytherin team started laughing, though to Harry’s ears it was a bit forced. Harry hoped he hadn’t sounded as daft when he was twelve.

“At least no one on the Gryffindor team had to buy their way in,” Hermione said cattily. “They got in on pure talent.”

“*Someone* said it,” Jasmine whispered admiringly.

They weren’t prepared for what came out of Draco’s mouth next. His smug look had vanished.

“No one asked you, you filthy little mudblood!”

All hell broke loose.

Marcus jumped in front of Draco to block Fred and George. The Gryffindor chasers were shouting. Hermione looked confused, as if she’d never heard the term before. It wasn’t something she’d find in her school books. Monty glanced at him, understanding it was a bad word but not what it meant. Harry thought it was self-explanatory, but at the moment regretted not explaining to his brother in Knockturn Alley. It was mystifying that someone so critical in ending the war had no idea what it had all been about.

Half the Slytherin team looked like they wanted to curse Draco alongside the Gryffindors, but it was Ron who got a shot in under Marcus’ arm. He shouted something, inaudible in the mayhem, blasting Draco in the face with green light.

Harry recoiled. It was the wrong shade, though, and there was no chance a kid could pull off the Killing Curse. Ron wouldn’t even know the incantation.

Draco was thrown onto the grass, landing on his back. He groaned and clutched his stomach.

Marcus looked shaken by his new, high-priced seeker getting jinxed, hurrying over to help Draco sit up. Draco shoved him away and rolled onto his hands and knees, coughing.

“Is he going to be sick?” Phoebe asked. “What did he even get hit with?”

Draco gagged loudly, and several colorful slugs splattered onto the grass.

The Gryffindors took this cue to start laughing.

“I’m going to be sick too,” Jasmine said, putting a hand over her mouth.

“The Slug-Vomiting Jinx,” Harry said, taking out his wand and kneeling next to Draco. “You’re lucky he doesn’t know the hex. That one has the side effect of poisoning the victim. It depends on the types of slugs summoned.”

Draco glared at him and opened his mouth to respond, but instead vomited more slugs.

The little Gryffindor firstie had run up and was frantically taking pictures while most of the Gryffindor team fell about. Adrian was keeping himself together, barely, and Astrid had a look of vindictive glee.

“Do you know the counter?” Marcus asked in a low voice. “*Finite* didn’t work.”

“I do,” Harry said. His mum had an unusual number of books on jinxes, which Harry suspected had originated from a certain head of house. “It’s an object lesson in not calling people *mudblood*, don’t you think?”

“Evans,” Marcus growled, looking at him intently.

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry said, pointing his wand at Draco’s stomach. “*Slugulus abhorrens*.”

Draco stopped shuddering and spat out the rest of the slime in his mouth. He stood, pushing Marcus away again. He wiped his mouth, a look of disgust on his face.

“*You’ll* pay for that, Weasley,” he said. Some of the Gryffindors were still laughing, Monty included. “Attacking me in front of all these witnesses because I insulted your girlfriend? Just you *wait* until my father hears about this!”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Ron protested, blushing a violent shade of red. He still had his wand out. Monty noticed Harry looking at it, and pushed Ron’s arm down.

“Clear off, Wood,” Marcus said. “Before I send someone to get Professor Snape.”

“You *should* get him,” Angelina Johnson said, stepping forward. She was nearly as tall as Flint, though he was much bulkier. “We can get McGonagall involved too. I’m sure she’d *love* to hear what kind of words your new seeker is throwing around.”

“Doesn’t your team have rules about that?” Alicia Spinnet asked, looking pointedly at Graham Montague, who scowled at her. “Too many detentions, too many points lost...”

Marcus snorted, crossing his arms. “Yeah, we’ve got *standards*. Go on, get McGonagall for all I care. We’ve still got permission to use the pitch, and you’ve just attacked our new seeker. *Clear off*.”

“Nighty night, muddy!” Adrian said, grinning at him.

Harry shook his head and closed his bed curtains. He wasn’t sure what had got into Adrian’s head. Maybe it was his non-reaction to hearing the slur. Or perhaps taking a little too long to anti-jinx Draco had exposed his mostly muggle roots. More likely, it was because Harry had inadvertently laughed the first time Adrian had done it. Whatever the reason, Adrian was getting a kick out of calling him *muddy*. It had been going on all day.

Harry had no idea where he fell on the blood status spectrum. Quarter blood? At what point did the magical *blood* win out?

The Gryffindor team had ultimately left the pitch, Oliver Wood recognizing they’d come out looking worse if professors actually did get involved. Lockhart passing by had done a lot in getting people to shut up, a combination of people too shy to interact with him or too annoyed to want to deal with him.

Harry wormed under his blankets. The showdown on the pitch had been the highlight of the day. The actual practice had been lackluster, just repetitive drills that were much more fun to do than watch. The Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones were impressive brooms, on paper. It was obvious the practice was mostly to get the players used to the new brooms. Bletchley had nearly decapitated himself on a hoop overshooting a save, and the chasers kept fumbling passes at high speed. Draco was a decent flier, but didn’t come close to Monty’s innate ability.

Harry reckoned overestimating his skill was why Draco had resorted to committing a foul to beat out Terence. His performance that morning *could* have been lingering effects from Ron’s jinx. When practice was over Marcus had hustled Draco to the hospital wing.

He was glad his friends had got to practice too, running drills alongside the main team, and hoped they’d get to play in some of the interhouse games. He had spotted Astrid and Adrian muttering about something. Harry suspected if Astrid wanted to *arrange* things so she would get to play, it was only a matter of time until he got wrapped up in her scheme.

Just as he was falling asleep, he heard something strange.

“*Come...come to me...*”

“Not interested,” Harry muttered, patting around for his wand to put up a silencing charm.

“*...let me rip you...*”

Harry sat up. He’d never heard such a voice before, a voice so cold and detached. It was faint, too, moving away from him.

“*...let me tear you...*”

He got out of bed, leaving his dormitory to follow the voice, gripping his wand. If it was a weird ghost there wasn’t much he could do. The castle ghosts would deal with it, or get the

professors involved.

It was hard to tell where the voice was coming from. It sounded like it was something in the ceiling. Peeves? He'd heard of the poltergeist blowing in people's ears when they were asleep. Whispering creepy things aligned with that behavior.

"...let me kill you..."

Harry stopped at the common room door, the voice barely audible. Kill? He rubbed his arms, feeling a sudden chill. The house-elf who had framed his brother had mentioned some threat at Hogwarts that year, so his dad had told him. There was no knowing how credible the threat was, and the house-elf had given no specifics. Hearing a strange voice that talked about killing fell neatly into the *threat* category.

Harry checked the time and noted it was almost midnight. He could wake a prefect, but they wouldn't thank him for it given the hour. What if the possessor of the voice was actually capable of killing? Where was it going?

Decided, Harry quietly left the common room and hurried to his dad's office.

Severus was revising his lesson plans in light of the disappointment of the first classes of the year. His little chat with Dumbledore about Lockhart's competence had been turned around on him. His expectations were *too high*. The students needed to be shown *fundamentals*. The worst part was Severus couldn't disagree. Watching Longbottom maul his ingredients was offensive on a metaphysical level. Someone needed to teach the boy how to hold a knife, and since it was his job, that unfortunate someone was Severus Snape.

A polite knock on the door pulled him out of his self-reflection. He was annoyed at the interruption, but glad he could redirect his criticism from himself to the interloper.

"Come in," he said, checking the time. It was just past midnight. Few people would dare disrupt him at such a late hour.

Severus was prepared to snipe at an unwanted visitor, but the door opened to reveal Harry, wearing his ridiculous sausage roll shirt and clearly having just woken up.

"What is it?" he asked as Harry quickly shut the door behind him.

Harry waved around, and Severus obliged him with silencing charms. He watched, concerned, as his son took a seat. Harry hadn't even put socks on, but he had his wand with him. He was unnaturally pale, and shivering.

Severus leaned forward, worried. "Harry?"

"I heard something," Harry said quietly. "A voice."

Pepperup

Chapter Summary

September/October 1992

Chapter Notes

So many interesting theories in the comments, I love it

Harry pushed his food around his plate, glancing at the head table. It had been a few weeks since he'd heard that strange voice, and while Professor Snape had said he'd look into it, Harry hadn't got any updates. It had made him start doubting what he heard, whether he'd heard anything at all. He stayed up late every night just in case it happened again. It helped stave off his nightmares, but losing sleep was starting to take its toll.

He glanced down at the slurry he'd turned his breakfast into and felt a wave of nausea. He had to take his potion that day—still unnamed, patent pending, whatever—and knew he had to eat. Harry sighed, shoved the plate away, and got a bowl of porridge.

It didn't help that he felt the telltale signs of a *cycle* coming on, which his treatment was meant to put a stop to. He hated it, it made him feel so *wrong*. Most days he didn't even think about the superfluous parts hidden inside of his body and under bandages. He could even bathe with the bandages on, and dry them with a spell. But then something would happen to remind him, hitting him with the revelation all over again.

A rush of wings announced the morning flock of owls. Harry tossed a bit of sausage up and caught the *Sunday Prophet* in return. The tawny owl hooted at him and flew off with her prize. He was glad for the meager distraction the news provided. It was a shame nothing interesting was happening. The Wizengamot's closed sessions, keeping the populace in the dark, a Celestina Warbeck tour, the price of dragon livers falling, a blight striking the mandrake nurseries in Cameroon. He was about to give up on the paper and force himself to eat again when Charity let out a victorious *whoop*.

"Evans!" she exclaimed. "Did you see Grugwyn Rufford's letter?"

Harry clenched his teeth. Normally he liked Charity's exuberance, but he was in a foul mood.

"Not yet," he said, flipping to the opinion section.

“Grugwyn Rufford?” Astrid asked dully. She didn’t look to be in a good mood either.

The main team had gradually become accustomed to the Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones, but Bletchley was still a *twitchy little bitch* according to Astrid. Draco was shaping up as a seeker, but Terence had more experience. Even with his slower Comet he could beat Draco in a seekers’ match. Draco resorted to fouling, which Marcus never called him out on. In fact, he was turning into a rather foul-friendly captain. Cassius had pointed out, and Harry agreed, that Marcus seemed desperate to win.

“He’s the captain of the Welsh gobstones team,” Harry explained to his friends. “The *Prophet* didn’t cover the international tournament this year. They beat Hungary.”

“Deeply boring?” Charity shrieked, throttling the paper. “*Deeply boring?* I’ll give you *deeply boring*, you cretin!”

“Miss Lament, you are a prefect!” Professor McGonagall said from the head table. “Control yourself!”

“I need an owl!” Charity had her wand out and looked about to net an owl for herself before her fellow seventh-years pulled her down. “What kind of editor is this? *Deeply boring!*”

Harry looked away from his eccentric captain and read through Rufford’s letter. He grimaced when he was done. “Yeah, the *Prophet* doesn’t look good here. They say Rufford’s just a member and not a captain of a national team.”

Astrid took the paper from him, scanning it quickly and snorting. “They *did* talk about Puddlemere United’s new flying bus a lot. This gobstones bloke is right, they *could* have put in a single line. They managed to publish his letter. Wankers. Funny how they’ve got an article on Pud U changing the stitching on their robes right next to the letter...”

Harry finished his porridge as Charity was escorted out of the Great Hall, presumably off to pen her own strongly worded letter to the editor.

“What they don’t understand,” Harry said, standing up, “is that gobstones is not merely a game. It’s an art.”

“You’re not going to finish that line of thinking?” Cassius asked, looking up from his book on crystallomancy. He had moved on from furniture to glassware.

“Like the cheese, gobstones stands alone,” Harry said.

Cassius looked nonplussed.

“It’s from a nursery rhyme,” Harry said, deciding that was enough for them to go on. True, it was a *muggle* nursery rhyme, but it wasn’t like anyone around them could prove that.

“Are you going after her?” Adrian asked saucily. “Comfort your captain in her time of need?”

Harry snorted. “No, it’s *my* time of need. I’m going to the hospital wing.”

Harry gazed into the swirling red depths of his potion. At Madam Pomfrey's prompting he chugged it down. It left a chalky and metallic taste in his mouth, and he shivered as he felt the potion begin to work. The potion wasn't pleasant to consume, and Professor Snape had withheld the ingredients for some reason, but it gave him a rush. It made him feel more like himself.

He was chasing the potion down with some cloyingly sweet pumpkin juice when he heard Madam Pomfrey greet someone.

"Mr. Weasley, you're late! That's unusual for you."

"My apologies, Madam Pomfrey."

"Come along, into my office. Unless you want to sit out here with the rest of the rabble?"

Despite himself, Harry slipped off his bed and stuck his head out. He hadn't seen Percy much since school started, and he hadn't spoken to him at all. He thought, maybe since OWLs were over, Percy would have more time. And he *knew* Percy had a way to *make* more time. It explained all the classes he took, and his caginess when asked about it.

He got caught immediately.

"Mr. Evans!" Madam Pomfrey exclaimed. "If you're up and about you can see yourself out."

"Did you mean to rhyme?" he asked, grinning.

"Out here is fine, Madam Pomfrey," Percy said, walking to a hospital bed on his own.

Madam Pomfrey frowned, but said, "If you like. I'll just be a moment." She went off to her office. Harry hesitated, then wandered over to Percy.

"Prefect Weasley," he said.

"Mr. Evans," Percy said. "What brings you to the hospital wing?"

"The usual," Harry said evasively, then immediately felt bad. He *had* sussed out Percy's magical diabetes, which Percy seemed to keep from pretty much everyone. He searched his memory for something he could tell Percy that wouldn't be too damning. "I've got kidney problems."

Percy raised his eyebrows. "I'm sorry to hear that."

He shrugged, trying to think of another topic. School? They were in different years. Quidditch? Neither of them cared for it. Gobstones? The price of dragon livers? How much the *Daily Prophet* sucked?

Harry was struck with an idea just as Madam Pomfrey came over with a tray.

“Mr. Evans, enough chit-chat,” she said, shoos him away. “I’ll just shut these curtains...”

“He can stay,” Percy said abruptly. “He already knows.”

Madam Pomfrey gave Harry an appraising look.

“I was going to ask Prefect Weasley his opinion on the new Muggle Protection Act,” Harry said. “It can wait, though,” he added, trying not to watch as Percy’s robes were opened and his shirt was lifted. Madam Pomfrey held a menacing syringe in her hand and flicked it several times with a fingernail.

“It’s a subcutaneous injection,” Percy said, frowning a little as Madam Pomfrey jabbed him in the stomach. Harry’s mouth went dry and he quickly looked away.

“Yeah, I’ve had those,” Harry said, rubbing his nose. There was an unusual odor, sweet and robust, something entirely unique. He glanced at Percy’s exposed stomach again just as his shirt was pulled back down.

“The Muggle Protection Act,” Percy said, snapping Harry out of his daze. He blushed, hoping he hadn’t been caught looking

“No politics in the hospital wing,” Madam Pomfrey said firmly. “Run along, you two.”

Harry walked out of the hospital wing with Percy, wondering how to start the conversation.

“I know all about it, of course,” Percy said, graciously taking the matter out of Harry’s hands. “Father left drafts around the house all summer. I don’t believe he thought any of us would be interested.”

Harry opened his mouth to protest this categorically untrue statement. Only a total stranger or complete idiot would think Percy was uninterested in law. But he saw the conflicted expression on Percy’s face, and instead asked, “Would you tell me about it? The *Prophet* skipped the details.”

Percy officiously pushed up his glasses. “As you wish.”

Harry was glad it was Sunday morning. Most people were on the grounds enjoying the tail end of summer, or scrambling to finish any work due the upcoming week. It left the corridors mostly quiet, and Harry noticed Percy led them down ones with few portraits, if any.

“I don’t have the precise wording memorized,” Percy said. “The proceedings are all very hush-hush for now.”

“What a surprise,” Harry said drily, earning a small smile from Percy.

“That being said, I do know the broad strokes. The MPA essentially establishes new criteria for artifact misuse and has harsher sentencing. Most cases of misuse would just get you a slap on the wrist. Biting kettles, shrinking keys, that sort of thing. If caught, there would be a

citation and a nominal fine. That is partially why the office is so underfunded. Father's intent is to incorporate *mens rea*, that means—"

"Guilty mind," Harry supplied.

"Indeed. Or, in other words, the *intent* behind the misuse. Instances of intentional muggle-baiting will be more strictly punished. Higher fines, potentially time in Azkaban."

Percy's expression grew more serious as he spoke.

"There's more to it than that," Harry intuited.

Percy hesitated, then said, "Yes. This is draft legislation, Evans. Strictly confidential."

"I promise I won't be running off to the *Prophet*," Harry said. "Some of my friends have heard about it from family members in the Wizengamot, you know."

"To be expected," Percy said. "My great-aunt Muriel is the bill's sponsor. Which is why I wish to emphasize its premature nature. The ideas are inchoate, the language nebulous. Father is putting a considerable amount of time into shaping it up."

"Okay," Harry said, unsurprised that Muriel Prewett *had* been involved.

Percy had led him all the way to the Astronomy Tower. Everyone knew it was out-of-bounds except for classes, but Percy walked right up to the rampart, crossing his arms behind his back and looking out across the grounds. It was incredibly affected, but Harry was captivated by the sight.

"The first section begins with redefining several key terms," Percy said. "Misuse, artifact, muggle, muggle-baiting."

"They redefine *muggle*?" Harry asked.

"In the context of the law," Percy explained. "Muggles with no exposure to the magical world and muggles with. Squibs are not legally considered muggles in most cases, but with respect to the MPA they would fall under the latter. Relatives of muggleborns, muggles who have been turned by werewolves or vampires, and so on. I suspect father was...encouraged to add the distinction to narrow liability."

"What, if you know about magic and get tricked by a regurgitating toilet, it's your own fault?"

"You heard about that, did you?" Percy asked, smiling slightly. "But it's as you've said. The thinking goes that muggles are both too stupid *and* should know better. The MPA goes on to outline regulations on *magical modification* of muggle artifacts. Charming and enchanting, but also transfiguration. With this is a new permitting schema, oversight on sale and redistribution, with whom liability lies and when. New sentencing procedures, wand restrictions, progressive fining, restitution, muggle sensitivity classes. It is a very expansive bill."

“Yeah, I can see that,” Harry said, leaning against the rampart. He’d never been in the Astronomy Tower during the day, and in class they always looked at the sky. Seeing all of the grounds spread out was breathtaking. He hadn’t realized how massive the Forbidden Forest was, extending all the way to distant mountains shrouded in mist.

“What’s your opinion on it?” Harry asked.

Percy was silent, his face blank. Harry thought he might not answer at all.

“It’s paternalistic,” Percy said.

“Because your father wrote it?” Harry teased.

Percy smiled faintly and shook his head. “No. Muggles aren’t inept children we have to care for. I agree we need to protect them from abuses of magic, just like we need to protect *ourselves* from such things. Witches and wizards also get tricked by enchanted objects, all the time. It happens with children frequently, though you never see a parent brought in for one of their children accidentally getting cursed by a family heirloom.”

“So you want to stop baiting in general?” Harry asked.

Percy ran a hand through his coppery curls, and Harry’s eyes followed the motion. “Not quite. Requiring permits to sell *any* enchanted items isn’t feasible. Regulating something like that would be a bureaucratic nightmare. It would be a good way to expand the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, and the additional administrative bodies proposed. Permitting boards, inspectors, enforcement.”

“It’s a way for your dad to make money,” Harry said. “I mean, he’s allowed to have more than one reason for writing a new law, right?”

“He’s a public servant,” Percy said. “One of the better ones, in my opinion.”

“But you don’t support this,” Harry said, watching Percy closely.

Percy sighed, then said, “Not in its entirety, no. But father wouldn’t...” He shook his head, frustrated. “That’s neither here nor there. Professor Burbage has been very eye-opening regarding magical opinions towards muggles. It’s obvious that we see muggles as both weak and dangerous, and we’ve discussed how this influenced the war, and our current views on muggleborns. They are both ignorant of the magical world, yet dangerous for their magic and association with muggles.”

“It should be a mandatory class,” Harry said, looking over the grounds again. Some people were flying over the Black Lake, playing a game of chase with the Giant Squid, whose tentacles undulated in the air.

“Perhaps,” Percy said. “Professor Burbage says it’s our responsibility to have these conversations with people. Even if they don’t agree with us, it gets them to think. It’s quite interesting, the class. She gives us reading for the week and we spend the lesson in debate. We’ve been going over the *magification* of muggle technology. How frequently we adopt

their *artifacts*. And, this is interesting, she argues against the use of the term *artifact*. She says it romanticizes muggles, makes them appear quaint. The language we use is important, it carries meaning. As I'm sure you know, this is foundational to some magic. Ironically, not the least of which is..."

Harry smiled as he listened to Percy ramble about his Muggle Studies class. It was a nice way to spend a Sunday morning. The day was turning out better than he thought it would.

Filch aggressively scrubbed frog brains that had been stuck to the ceiling via some potions accident in the previous class. He coughed wetly into a handkerchief, and Harry cringed away. The elderly man was on a rickety ladder, seesawing above them and spraying his germs all over the place. Harry had wondered if germ theory had ever reached the magical world. He now had his answer. No.

Harry sighed, then coughed a little. He knew that wasn't true. Madam Pomfrey had tried to contain the spread of the cold as best as she could, and their potions classes had been spent brewing Pepperup for the school. One of the ingredients was mandrake root, and given the recent scarcity Professor Snape had grown more tyrannical.

Harry coughed again, shielding his potion from frog brains and his own effluvia.

Adrian leaned away from him. "You need to go to Pomfrey, Muds."

Harry gave him a flat look. After almost two months his new nickname had evolved. But Adrian was right. They still had the rest of their classes to get through. And he had promised to study with Cedric in the library that evening. Being in different houses and different classes, and with his gobstones co-captaincy and Cedric's quidditch practice, there weren't many opportunities to hang out together. Studying in the library was a good solution. If Harry was lucky, he'd also get to see his brother.

After class, with additional prompting from Professor Snape, Harry made his way to the hospital wing. He would have rather drunk his own potion straight from the cauldron, but it had to stew for a few hours and Professor Snape was taking over the final steps.

There was a queue outside of the hospital wing as others had the same idea, wanting a top off to get through the rest of the day. Harry spotted Percy and his little sister. Ginevra looked shaky and frightfully pale. Harry watched as Percy rubbed her back gently, an action born of long habit. Percy had four younger siblings, he surely had practice taking care of them when they were ill.

Harry wouldn't be able to bully his own brother into the hospital wing, or laugh with him over the steam pouring out of his ears as if his whole head was on fire. The effect was more pronounced with Ginevra, and she blushed furiously when another first-year tactlessly

pointed it out, making the observation more apt. Percy led her away, a protective arm around her shoulders.

He choked up. It had nothing to do with his cold, but Madam Pomfrey gave him an extra potion anyway.

“What are you reading?”

Cedric set his books on the table Harry was at and sat across from him. Harry saw it was the set of Lockhart books. He hoped he could convince Cedric to ritualistically burn their copies at the end of the year. Lockhart had been scared into actually teaching, and he *did* have a lot of anecdotes for dealing with various creatures. A side effect of having written so many books, Harry imagined.

“It’s magical theory,” Harry said, holding up the book for inspection. “Wand gestures.”

“What about them?” Cedric asked, leaning closer. That was one thing Harry quite liked about Cedric. He was always interested in what Harry was doing.

“Well,” Harry said, blushing a little, “did you know your dominant hand affects the direction of a gesture?”

Cedric raised his eyebrows. “I had no idea.”

Harry nodded, unsurprised. “You’re right-handed, as are the vast majority of wand users. It’s not something they’d talk about in class either, or they’d have to teach the lesson twice over. Basically, left-handed people like me have to do things upside down and backwards, otherwise the spell isn’t as effective. The actual impact varies, which is what I’m reading about. In extreme cases a spell might backfire.”

“I still should have heard of it,” Cedric said. “Seems like it would be common knowledge.”

Harry lowered the book. “People who were left-handed used to be forced to practice magic right-handed, even when drawing runes or stirring potions. In most places it was considered bad luck to be left-handed, until someone did actual research to show that it was forcing people to use wands meant for left hands in their right hands that was messing up their spells. In Rome, being left-handed was considered *good* luck, but that belief died when the empire fell. This book,” Harry said, lifting it up a little, “was only published about fifty years ago. That’s modern in wizarding terms.”

Cedric looked at him with stars in his eyes. “You’re *really* smart, you know.”

“Thanks,” Harry mumbled. He didn’t really think of himself as particularly smart, he just read a lot. He couldn’t recite textbooks verbatim like that Granger girl. “It’s just something I’m interested in is all. Ollivander asked you for your wand arm, right?”

“He did,” Cedric said, smiling at Harry.

Harry cleared his throat. “Now you know why.”

Someone dropped a book nearby, and Cedric jerked away, rubbing the back of his head and smiling shyly.

"Shall we get started?" he asked.

After Cedric got settled, they worked on a comparative essay for Defense. Wendigos and wechuges. The two creatures were closely related. Both were humanoid and cannibalistic, both preferred cold environments. Both were absolutely terrifying predators and were far, far away in North America. Wendigos ranged in the United States, while wechuge were more commonly found in Canada. Lockhart's books were thin on the ground regarding creatures of the Americas, so they had to rely on what the library had to offer. It was a considerable amount, and Harry took to the research easily. He loved flipping through books and comparing passages, and he was glad Cedric was doing his fair share of work.

“What are the odds one of our essays is used for his next book?” Harry asked as they were putting the books they'd gathered back.

Cedric pouted a little. “I don't think he's like that.”

Harry hummed noncommittally, not wanting to peddle his anti-Lockhart agenda too aggressively. He hadn't told anyone about going to Professor Snape that first day. Watching one of Lockhart's impromptu stage plays had been enough. A career in theater would have suited the man better, but Harry didn't want to give anyone ideas. There was enough Gilderoy Lockhart in the world as it was, and should the magical world open its arms to film and television, it was inevitable his brother's life would be adapted for those mediums.

Harry wasn't a total separatist, but that was one of the strongest arguments against integrating more muggle culture. No biopics of his mum's death.

As he was packing things away into his bag, Cedric grabbed his hand. Harry looked up, his heart pounding.

“I wanted to ask you something,” Cedric said, moving closer.

Harry swallowed nervously. “Yeah?”

“It's Hogsmeade next weekend,” Cedric said. He squeezed Harry's hand lightly. “Do you want to go? With me?”

Harry stared idiotically at Cedric for a moment, then forced his head to move in what he hoped looked like a nod.

Cedric smiled brightly at him. “I've got to go to practice now. Gryffindor and Slytherin keep booking the pitch at all hours.”

“The first game is coming up,” Harry said faintly. Cedric close up was overwhelming, and he had no idea what to do about it.

“Don’t tell anyone,” Cedric said in a low voice, leaning closer, “but I’m rooting for Slytherin. Have a good night, Harry.”

Harry watched Cedric pick up his bag and leave the library, giving Harry one last look before he was out of sight. Harry dropped into his chair, shaking. He’d thought...

Once he calmed down, he finished packing his things up. It was getting close to curfew, so he was in a rush as he exited the library. As such, he barely avoided colliding with someone racing through the entrance hall.

“Watch it,” the person snapped. “I’m carrying something fragile!”

“Sorry,” Harry said. He did a double take when he saw it was Percy. He was holding a pile of coals.

“Evans,” Percy said, his glasses slipping down his nose. Harry had the urge to push them back up for him. “Beg pardon, I have an injured creature here that needs an active fire immediately.” As he said this, a dully glowing fire salamander stuck its head out of the coals. Percy must have used a flame-freezing charm to protect his hands.

Curious, Harry followed Percy as he left the castle.

“You should go to your common room,” Percy said, walking quickly towards Hagrid’s hut. “You’re at risk of breaking curfew.”

“Are you going to take points?” Harry asked, grinning at him.

“I have more pressing matters at hand,” Percy said, and Harry chuckled under his breath.

“What happened to it?” he asked.

“Fred and George were feeding the poor thing fireworks,” Percy said. “It was bouncing off the walls, shooting sparks. Fire salamanders can handle *fire*, not explosions. They need an active fire to survive, but can go without for several hours. They are amphibious, actually, though not in the sense you might understand it. Their ideal habitat is a lava pool.”

“Not many lava pools in Scotland,” Harry said, understanding why Percy was so agitated.

“They stole the salamander from their Care class,” Percy said heatedly. “Stole it and tortured it. Everyone thought it was *such* a laugh. The twins are *so* funny, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, their victims are their biggest fans,” Harry said. Fred and George really weren’t that cruel with their pranks, usually it was all in good fun. But hurting an animal? “Did you take points?”

“Obviously I took points,” Percy snapped. “Not that it ever does any good. It’s practically a competition between them, who loses the most. I wouldn’t be surprised if they roped Jordan

in to take bets!”

Harry had never seen Percy so angry before. It was fascinating, though he was glad it wasn't directed at him.

“Why not give them detention with Hagrid?” he suggested, just as they reached the gamekeeper's hut. “They can explain what they did to the fire salamander to the person who raised it. Unless Kettleburn did?”

“No, it was Hagrid,” Percy said. “If you would knock for me, it would be appreciated.”

“Of course,” Harry said, rapping the door.

“It's a good idea,” Percy said, looking at the coals he was carrying. They were starting to go cold in the chill October night. “I wasn't thinking very clearly in the moment. I was more concerned with the well-being of the creature.”

The door opened, revealing a surprised Hagrid. Harry hadn't interacted with the man often and felt like an intruder, but Hagrid immediately recognized Percy and welcomed them in. Soon the fire salamander was settled in a hot fire, nibbling on ashwinder eggs which Hagrid said had a healing effect for the species. He gave them tea and rock cakes that were more rock than cake. The flavor was lovely, though, and Harry got to see Hagrid rant about fire salamanders and writing to Mrs. Weasley and getting the headmaster involved.

When he and Percy were let go, it was well after curfew. Neither mentioned it.

“Dinner *and* a show,” Harry said as they walked back to the castle. “You know how to treat a bloke.”

“I am merely acting within my duties as a prefect,” Percy said, stopping in front of the grand staircase. “I'm sure you can find your way to your common room from here.”

Harry backed towards the entrance to the dungeons. “Thank you, Prefect Weasley.”

Percy rolled his eyes. “Go to bed, Evans, before I *do* decide to take points.”

Silent Night Walk

Chapter Summary

Halloween 1992

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry woke up on Halloween morning with a profound sense of grief and longing.

He pretended he was fine, that he was looking forward to Hogsmeade, to the feast. And he was. He was going to spend the day with Cedric, and he'd get to see his brother enjoy the castle's celebrations.

He wasn't alone with his grief this year, as he had been for so many years. As he pulled pieces from the bottom of his pumpkin walnut muffin—something the house-elves seemed to have baked specifically for him—he glanced at the head table, where Professor Snape was trapped between Gilderoy Lockhart and Charity Burbage. Harry had noticed his dad had, over the weeks, chosen the lesser of two evils. If forced to socialize, he preferred Professor Burbage.

Professor Burbage hadn't made quite as big a stir as Lockhart. She wasn't an international celebrity, as Lockhart so often claimed he was, and while they were of an age, Lockhart was a meticulously groomed vision in dazzling robes. Professor Burbage looked more like a farmer's daughter.

His dad wasn't in the mood for entertaining that morning, mechanically eating a full English while feigning sporadic hearing loss. Lockhart hadn't got the message and was yammering away. Professor Burbage was happily eating her own breakfast and chatting to Professor Babbling.

Harry didn't let his attention linger, lest he draw the headmaster's interest. He chewed thoughtfully on a walnut he had unearthed, scanning the Great Hall, catching a glimpse of the Gryffindor table. Monty seemed to be in a good mood, chatting happily with his friends. Harry puzzled over that, but reckoned his brother's lack of knowledge about his parents had resulted in Monty not associating Halloween with their deaths. It was something Harry had known his entire life, and something the *Daily Prophet* forcibly reminded him of every year.

Indeed, the owls were already flying into the Great Hall. Halloween was more than a day to celebrate and remember the dead—though most people politely forgot about the latter—but to celebrate the defeat of Voldemort, lionize the deaths of Lily and James Potter, the miraculous survival of baby Monty.

Harry didn't bother looking at his own copy of the *Prophet*. He'd seen it all before. He did notice a dearth of *Daily Prophets* at the Gryffindor table, not unusual since kids often weren't very interested in current events. At least Monty wouldn't have it shoved into his face, unless someone brought it up with him. He'd be able to enjoy the day, which Harry liked to imagine their mum, and James Potter, would have preferred.

Harry wasn't sure if he could ever really look forward to Halloween. The day itself was a harbinger of doom.

Something crashed onto the Gryffindor table, and people craned their necks to see what the fuss was about. It was an owl, a very old owl with the look of a ragged feather duster, a red envelope in his beak. The owl had landed in a pile of eggs, right in front of Fred and George Weasley.

Harry took a sip of tea to hide his smile.

"Open it!" one of them said.

"No, you open it!" said the other.

"Someone open it before it explodes!" Neville Longbottom cried.

Harry glanced at Percy, who had a look of immense satisfaction as he watched his brothers open the howler together.

"Manfred Gideon Weasley!" Mrs. Weasley's voice bellowed. "Georgius Fabian Weasley!"

Harry nearly choked on his tea. Manfred? Georgius?

"How dare you harm an innocent creature! You could have killed the poor thing! Your father and I are absolutely ashamed of you! We did not bring you up to behave like this! You could have been expelled! Mr. Filch has an entire *drawer* dedicated to you two, and yet this takes the cake!"

The entire Great Hall listened in stunned silence to Mrs. Weasley's rant as the twins grew paler, their faces in mortified rictus.

"You're lucky you're not being pulled from the quidditch team, the both of you! No Hogsmeade for the rest of the year!"

Harry glanced at Oliver Wood, who was glaring at the twins and looked ready to start berating them himself. Percy, sitting next to Wood, was calmly sipping his coffee, smugness practically radiating off of him.

When Mrs. Weasley stopped shouting, the red letter burst into flames and coated the old owl in a layer of ash. Alicia Spinnet gently removed the owl from the pile of eggs and wiped him down. The Great Hall was silent for a beat, then the tables erupted with laughter. Harry could see that Fred and George—Manfred and Georgius as people were now calling them—were trying to play it off as a joke, but the two were obviously rattled. Rescinding their

Hogsmeade privilege was a brilliant move on Mrs. Weasley's part. Harry hoped they'd got detention with Hagrid too.

The howler also distracted people from the headlines, which Harry was grateful for. It seemed like it wouldn't be such a bad Halloween after all.

Harry wasn't sure what to expect from Halloween in Hogsmeade. He knew the Great Hall would be decorated again, carved pumpkins and turnips and all that. As for what magical children did traditionally, he had no idea. Fancy dress parties didn't make much sense, what would they even dress as? Creatures they knew were actually real? Bobbing for apples?

Midmorning he met Cedric in the entrance hall, still blushing from the teasing his friends gave him when he said they were going to Hogsmeade together.

"Ready?" Cedric asked as they waited to be signed out by Filch.

For what? Harry wanted to ask. Would he be struggling to hollow a turnip out with a spoon? He hadn't brought a spoon with him. "Yes."

Cedric smiled at him, so Harry must have been convincing. Besides the underlying pressure to *have fun*, Harry was self-conscious about his clothes. He didn't have any nice robes to wear about town, just his school robes. Outside of school, he always dressed like a muggle. He could have thrown a cloak over his all-black ensemble of trainers, trousers, and one of his grandad's jumpers—that his dad chronically wore all black had not influenced him at all, black was *classic*—but he hadn't got his cloak back from Monty yet. It had been their mum's, so Harry wasn't that cut up about it. Monty had just as much a right to it as he did. Still, Harry missed it.

Cedric, for his part, had grown up in a magical household, and it reflected in what his everyday wear was. Actually, it seemed like he had dressed up for the occasion in a rich brown cloak embroidered with leaves along the hems, worn over breeches tucked into polished dragonhide boots and a simple tunic. It was heroic in its execution, as if Cedric had stepped out of a ballad.

Harry felt like an idiot next to him, but Cedric didn't seem to care about the disparity. At least Harry had worn new trousers, and Cedric wasn't wearing full on robes. Harry would have felt even more tragically muggle.

"Is there anything in particular you want to do?" Cedric asked as they walked to Hogsmeade.

Harry struggled for an answer. Skateboarding was out of the question. He doubted most of his peers at Hogwarts would understand the appeal when one could hop on a broom and fly around. He'd have to explain it, and the lack of pavement was inimical to skateboarding anyway.

“Not really,” he said. “Have a look around?”

Cedric nodded. They were walking rather close together, and their hands occasionally brushed. Harry wasn’t sure if they were supposed to be holding hands or not, it felt a little too couple-y when they were still in the liminal space between *friends* and *boyfriends*.

Harry let Cedric take the lead, as he was content to simply roam around Hogsmeade. They went to Zonko’s where a frazzled Lee Jordan was having an existential crisis over frogspawn soap and dungbombs, repeatedly checking a list against his selections.

“Must be shopping for Manfred and Georgius,” Harry said quietly, looking over a display of invisible windy blasters that promised *hurricane force flatulence*.

Cedric was examining a new product, a fanged frisbee that growled when he prodded it. “No Hogsmeade all year, rough.”

“You reap what you sow,” Harry said, moving on to a display of gag telescopes that looked prepared to concuss someone. “They stuffed fireworks into a fire salamander they nicked from Care. Hagrid was on the warpath.”

“Is that what happened?” Cedric said. “I heard they’d just let off fireworks in the common room.”

“From inside a small animal,” Harry said.

“That’s...a bit much,” Cedric said.

Harry snorted. “You could say that. You know,” he said, looking around, “a lot of these things could be used for muggle-baiting.”

He carefully picked up a nose-biting teacup, wondering why on earth anyone would buy such a thing.

“I suppose so,” Cedric said, giving Harry an odd look. “Did you want to get anything?”

Harry shook his head, amazed he hadn’t noticed how many look-alike muggle items there were, just sitting around in shops for people to purchase for a few sickles.

They went to Honeydukes next, which had been possessed by the Halloween spirit. Pumpkin featured heavily in the sweets on offer, pumpkin marshmallows and lollies that glowed from within. There were ginger and licorice snaps eager to bite curious fingers. Harry was drawn to the toffee apples, two previously forbidden foods which combined would have sent his orthodontic progress back to the paleolithic era. He had to have them. Gum, too. Drooble’s had a whole fleet of autumnal flavors. Cinnamon, fig, cabbage, pumpkin and currant, beef stew.

Harry decided to save the toffee apples for another time given the challenge he expected in actually biting one, but took out his retainers to chew on some gum as they walked. Cedric watched him curiously.

“Do you have to wear those forever?” Cedric asked.

“My retainers?” Harry asked, accidentally breathing fire. The cinnamon gum couldn’t just be cinnamon, there had to be a gimmick. “Yeah, the rest of my life.”

“Oh,” Cedric said.

“Why?” Harry asked, feeling unusually self-conscious. He had liked his braces, and he liked his retainers once he’d got used to the way they fit in his mouth. He barely noticed them.

“Does it bother you? I’m not going to have to wear them *all* the time, just at night once my dentist says it’s okay.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” Cedric said quickly, blushing a little. “I, uh, think it’s cute.”

Harry was fairly certain he had caught on fire. “I—”

“Do you want to look at the Shrieking Shack?” Cedric asked, looking off to the side.

They had wandered a little away from the groups of students on the high street. Harry was struck with the sudden realization that they had been mostly left alone. His friends weren’t the clingy type, so he wasn’t surprised they hadn’t interfered. Even Adrian, the most likely to put his foot in it. But Cedric’s perpetual crowd of friends and admirers were notably absent as well.

Harry glanced at Cedric’s hand, which was busy fiddling with his nice cloak. He wiped his own hand off on his trousers.

“*Carpe diem*,” he said to himself. “Or would it be *carpe manus*?”

“What was that?” Cedric asked, turning to him. He was still blushing.

Harry didn’t waste any more time thinking about it. He gently took Cedric’s hand and smiled up at him. Cedric being as nervous as he was made it easier.

“Yeah, let’s check it out. Think it’s really haunted?”

The weather had turned stormy, though you wouldn’t know it from the Slytherin Dungeon.

“I heard Dumbledore’s got a troupe of dancing skeletons,” one third-year girl said to her friends.

That rumor had been going around the castle all week, and was met with varying degrees of indifference. As Jasmine had put it, it would only be noteworthy if the skeletons were autonomous and not charmed. They’d made pineapples tap-dance in first year, it wasn’t that impressive.

There was also a rumor about a deathday party, though no one knew whose it was or where it was happening, unless you happened to live in the dungeons and noticed the rapidly dropping temperature. Harry could see his own breath in the air as he walked with his friends to the Great Hall.

He'd been interrogated about his date with Cedric, though there hadn't been much to tell. No one needed to know how momentous something as simple as holding another boy's hand was to Harry Evans.

The Great Hall was spectacular as always. Floating candles, floating pumpkins with carved visages, bats, costumed skeletons rattling in the corners, golden plates and goblets, streamers. It was loud and bright and magical, distracting in a way that kept Harry from thinking about dead mothers and menacing trolls. He looked over at the Gryffindor table, and was surprised to see Monty was missing, along with Hermione and Ron.

Harry looked up at the head table and saw Professor Snape's blank face, the neutrality of occlumency. Was it because it was hard to enjoy a feast with Lily Evans dead? The unusual absence of Monty Potter? He looked at the Gryffindor table again, desperate to ask any of them where his brother was. But they were smiling and laughing, none showing any care for Monty's whereabouts. Even Percy was enjoying the feast with the other Gryffindor sixth-years.

It nearly paralyzed him with fear. The house-elf, the threat, Halloween, Monty.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Astrid asked.

"Yeah," Harry said, recalling where he was and what he was meant to be doing. The feast.

It wasn't as if he could tell Astrid he was on the verge of having a panic attack and needed to know where the hell his brother was. Had someone kidnapped him, was there *another* troll, why was the headmaster sitting at the head table like a bloody numpty while the Boy Who Lived was missing.

He couldn't get up and leave, it would be too conspicuous. Running around the castle, near hysterical. Suspicious. How would he even explain it?

Harry tried to take comfort from the lack of concern at the Gryffindor table, but his anxiety was going through the roof. It was bad. It was really bad. Stress could actually kill him, and he was almost two months away from his next appointment with Andromeda. He had Calming Draught with him, but his reliance on the potion was a secret he intended to keep.

Time passed with agonizing slowness. Harry's eyes kept drifting toward the entrance hall. He needed a reason to leave, if only to pop into a lavatory to take his potion.

When the solution came to him he wanted to bash his head on the table.

"I'm going to the loo," he said, standing up. His friends didn't even react, too busy gorging themselves. Adrian was a production unto himself.

He straightened his robes and left the Great Hall. Needing the toilet, an airtight alibi. Once in the entrance hall, he hastily pulled out a vial of Calming Draught and drank it in one swallow. The relief was instantaneous, and he sagged against a wall, out of sight of the ongoing feast.

“...rip...tear...kill...”

Harry stopped breathing.

It was the voice again, the voice he had heard nearly two months prior, and it sounded like it was right behind him.

He pushed away from the wall, whipping his wand out and pointing it at the featureless stone.

“...so hungry...for so long...”

“Go somewhere else to eat,” Harry said, spinning to where the voice had moved.

“...kill...time to kill...”

“This way!”

Harry gawked when his brother burst out of the dungeons and sprinted up the grand staircase, Hermione and Ron following close behind.

Harry chased after. His brother was moving in the direction of the voice.

“Monty,” Ron said, “what are we—”

“Shut up,” Monty snapped, pausing in the middle of the corridor.

“...I smell blood...I smell blood!”

“It’s going to kill someone!” Monty shouted, breaking into a run. Hermione and Ron looked at each other, but followed. Harry did as well, only stopping when they reached the next floor.

“Monty, what was that all about?” Ron asked, panting. “I couldn’t hear anything.”

“You heard something?” Harry asked. The voice had been fairly loud at the end

The three Gryffindors flinched and turned around.

“I did,” Monty said. He looked nauseated.

“I didn’t,” Hermione said, shaking her head, turning back to look down the corridor. She gasped, and pointed. “Look!”

Harry walked past Monty and his friends, holding his wand out and advancing slowly.

“It was talking about killing,” Monty said at his side. Harry nodded, deciding it was best not to reveal he also heard it. He didn’t know what it meant yet.

Something had been written on the wall between two windows.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED.

ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

Harry stopped walking.

He was slightly disgusted by how relieved he was that his brother wasn’t in any danger. He knew what the Chamber of Secrets was, there was a whole chapter dedicated to it in *Hogwarts: A History*. It sometimes came up in the common room, one of the greatest mysteries of Hogwarts. Slytherin’s monster, a monster that would cleanse the school of muggleborns. Nearly a millennium of searching had not revealed any chamber, nor any monster. Most considered it pureblood propaganda.

But Harry had heard that voice. Monty had too. And something had written that message.

Monty and his friends continued their approach, holding onto each other, and Harry followed to make sure none of them were attacked. Hermione in particular.

There was something hanging underneath the words. When Harry got closer, he saw it was Mrs. Norris. Her tail had been wrapped around a torch bracket, and she wasn’t moving. Her eyes were open, staring blankly. She looked frozen solid.

“Let’s get out of here,” Ron stammered, backing away.

“Shouldn’t we help?” Monty asked, glancing at Harry.

“We should get a professor,” Harry said.

“You can do that,” Ron said. “I’m not getting caught here.”

There wasn’t much of a choice, as the end-of-feast stampede had just begun.

Harry put his wand away, though he felt naked without it. Given the circumstances, he didn’t want to be immediately blamed. He looked at the approaching student body. He had no idea why so many people were walking through the second floor corridors. There were Slytherins and Hufflepuffs too, even though their common rooms were accessed from the entrance hall.

Harry puzzled over this as Draco Malfoy pushed his way to the front. He was smiling in a singularly hideous way.

“Enemies of the Heir, beware!” he crowed. “You’ll be next, mudbloods!”

“Ten points from Slytherin,” Professor Snape said over the ensuing silence. Harry looked around, and spotted Snape and a few other professors near the back of the crowd, along with the headmaster. “And a week’s detention.”

“What’s going on here?” Filch grumbled, forcing his way through the crowd. Harry had no idea what to say to the man, which was just as well since Filch began shrieking.

“Mrs. Norris! What have you done?”

Filch swung around, instantly focusing on Monty. His face was twisted with rage, his hands clawed as if to strike.

“You! You’ve murdered her! I’ll kill you! I’ll—”

“Argus!”

Dumbledore had got through the crowd too, along with the rest of the professors. Harry was absolutely mystified why Monty had been singled out. Had Filch been a Death Eater? A squib Death Eater?

The headmaster gently removed Mrs. Norris from the torch bracket, cradling her protectively in his arms.

“Come with me, Argus,” the headmaster said, glancing at Monty, Hermione, and Ron, and finally Harry. He lingered on Harry the longest. “You four as well.”

Harry shivered, then tucked his hands into his sleeves. He felt better touching his wand. Why was the entire school there? He tried to wrap his head around it as he followed the headmaster, Snape, and McGonagall to Lockhart’s office.

Lockhart’s office was the Defense professor’s office, and Harry hesitated before stepping in. He hoped no one had noticed, but the look Snape gave him made Harry abandon that possibility. The first and last time he’d been in the office Quirrell had tried to kill him.

It had changed in the months since. It was now an ode to Gilderoy Lockhart, lined with his pictures in various states of deshabille. Lockhart lit candles, illuminating a surprising number of framed hair rollers and hair nets. Harry wondered if the color came out of a bottle.

Dumbledore laid Mrs. Norris out on Lockhart’s desk to examine. McGonagall joined him, both leaning in close to the stiff cat. Monty and his friends sat, while Harry remained standing. Snape had drifted to stand next to him, and Harry spotted a vial in his hand. He shook his head minutely, and the vial vanished.

“It was definitely a curse that killed her,” Lockhart rambled while Filch sobbed brokenly. Dumbledore began mumbling and tapping Mrs. Norris with his wand. Harry narrowed his eyes, recalling the last time he had seen the wand. It was unusual, several inches longer than most other wands, wood silvered with age, distinguishable even in the flickering candlelight.

After some time, Dumbledore straightened and said, “She’s not dead, Argus.”

“She’s not?” Filch asked. Watching such an elderly man cry was awful.

“She has been petrified,” the headmaster said. “Though how, I cannot say.”

“Ask him!” Filch said, jabbing a finger at Monty.

Harry tried to step forward, but a firm hand on his shoulder stopped him.

“No second-year could have done this,” the headmaster said. “It would take dark magic of the most advanced—”

"One of them did it!"

Flich’s eyes narrowed, then he turned to Harry, scrutinizing him as if he’d never seen him before. Harry could not recall ever speaking to the man.

“I would never hurt a cat,” Harry said. He liked cats quite a lot, in fact. There were plenty of strays in Cokeworth, and he always hated when other kids tried to hurt them. He’d got into a few fights that way. “We found Mrs. Norris like that, and we were about to get help.”

“If I may,” Snape said, stepping forward. “It seems like a case of *wrong place, wrong time*.” He turned to look at Monty and his friends, sneering slightly. “However, the circumstances *are* suspicious. I don’t recall seeing Potter or his friends at the Halloween feast.”

Hermione was the first to speak, sitting up straight. “We were at a deathday party, professor.”

“There were hundreds of ghosts,” Ron said. “Ask any of them, they’ll tell you we were there!”

“But why not join the feast after?” Snape asked. “Why go down the corridor?”

“Because,” Monty said, clearly reaching for something. Hermione and Ron were watching him expectantly. “Because—”

Harry snorted, and Snape’s attention snapped to him.

“And what do you find so amusing, Mr. Evans?”

Harry shook his head. “I’m sorry, sir. I left the feast because I needed the loo. There’s a lavatory near where Mrs. Norris was found. But, isn’t it obvious why Potter wouldn’t want to go to a feast on Halloween?”

Everyone was looking at him now, including Monty, who had a terrible poker face. He looked completely baffled.

“Have you all really forgotten?” Harry asked when the room remained silent, frowning at his professors. The headmaster’s expression was inscrutable. “It’s October 31st. The day his parents—”

“That’s enough, Mr. Evans,” Professor McGonagall interrupted, finally understanding. “Most of us see this as a day to celebrate the defeat of You-Know-Who. I never considered...” she choked up. McGonagall had been working at Hogwarts a long time, and Lily and James Potter had been in Gryffindor. She would have known them better than their other professors.

Harry glanced at Monty, who looked even more disquieted than when they had found Mrs. Norris. Had he really not known his parents had died on Halloween?

“I agree that it is somewhat...indecorous...of us to expect students who have lost family to celebrate along with us,” McGonagall said, regaining her composure.

Professor Snape remained silent, watching Harry.

“R-right,” Monty said, bowing his head. Harry felt terrible for bringing it up if he *had* forgotten, or never known. Particularly after the other events of the evening.

“My cat has been petrified!” Filch said, his eyes bloodshot and bulging. “I want to see some punishment!”

“We will be able to cure her, Argus,” the headmaster said, his eyes finally leaving Harry. “Professor Snape can brew her a Mandrake Restorative Draught.”

“I’ll make it!” Lockhart piped up. “I must have done it a hundred times. I—”

“If we had any mandrake root left,” Snape cut in, turning away from Harry to address the headmaster. Lockhart deflated at being spoken over. “Our stores have been depleted supplying the hospital wing with Pepperup the past month.”

“Fortunately, Professor Sprout has procured some mandrakes,” the headmaster said. “It will, however, be some months until they are fully mature.”

“As there is nothing to immediately be done,” Snape said. “I believe Professor McGonagall and I should escort our wayward students to their respective dormitories.”

The headmaster looked all four of them over. “You may go. Minerva, if you would please.”

“Yes, headmaster,” McGonagall said, hurrying forward. “Come along, Potter, Granger, Weasley.”

The Gryffindors were herded out, all three shooting glances at Harry which he pretended not to notice.

“Evans,” Snape said sharply, sweeping out of the room. Harry silently followed. They passed the dripping red message on their way to the dungeons.

“It’s odd, isn’t it, sir,” Harry said once they were striding down the dungeon corridors, Harry struggling a little to keep up. “That the entire school arrived en masse to see that scene?”

“Have you completely taken leave of your senses?” his dad said, glaring down at him. “That’s a *girls’* lavatory on the second floor!”

“Granger might’ve needed it,” Harry said defensively, feeling stupid. “That’s what I meant, they could have been on the way there.”

“And why were *you* there?” his dad asked, stopping some distance from the common room entrance and casting silencing spells about them with sharp slices of his wand.

Harry bit his lip, then said, “I was worried. I needed a Calming Draught so I left the feast. Then I heard that voice again.”

“You followed the mysterious voice you heard in the walls?” his dad asked, as if it were the most idiotic thing he had ever heard.

“*He* was going in the same direction,” Harry said.

His dad looked blankly at him for a moment, then covered his eyes, exasperated. “The next time you hear *anything*, you come to me. Immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said.

“I should have known something was wrong when Potter wasn’t at the feast,” his dad said, shaking his head.

“I was wondering why no one seemed bothered,” Harry admitted. “I was panicking the whole time.”

“A deathday party, of all the stupid things to attend,” his dad muttered. He started walking again, apparently done with their conversation. “Tell Malfoy his detention will be with Flich.”

Harry looked at his dad appraisingly. “That’s brutal, sir.”

His dad smirked. “I know.”

Chapter End Notes

The message in the PDF I have says

ENEMIES OF THE HAIR, BEWARE

Vipera Evanesca

Chapter Summary

Halloween 1992 (still)

The common room was empty when Harry returned. He was glad the prefects had made everyone go to their dormitories instead of letting them wait around for him. He was not so lucky in his own dormitory, where he found all three of his roommates up and talking.

“It’s the Heir!” Adrian said, a little meanly in Harry’s opinion.

“Come off it,” Harry said, pulling off his robe. “Someone’s petrified Mrs. Norris. All this Heir business is a wind-up.”

“Attacking Mrs. Norris for a Halloween prank?” Cassius said. “Seems excessive.”

“No one likes Filch.” Terence said.

“Yeah, because he’s a squib,” Adrian said, laughing.

“Him being a squib has nothing to do with it,” Cassius said. “He is generally unpleasant.”

“Because he’s a *squib*,” Adrian insisted. “They’re all like that. Jealous.”

“I have a cousin who’s a squib,” Terence admitted quietly. “She went to live in the muggle world. She works in a biscuit factory. She’s nice.”

“Most witches and wizards are basically squibs if you take away their wands,” Cassius said, glancing at Harry for support.

“Filch would clobber you in a straight fight,” Harry said, smirking at Adrian. “Even if he *is* one foot in the grave.”

Adrian scoffed. “Like you’ve ever been in a fight.”

“I have, actually,” Harry said, getting his pajamas out of his trunk. “I wouldn’t recommend it. Anyway, that’s all. Someone’s fucking about and petrifying cats.”

“Wishful thinking, Muds,” Adrian said.

“Best not let Snape hear you calling him that,” Cassius said.

“Ten points *and* detention,” Terence said, retreating to his own bed.

“Harry doesn’t care,” Adrian said, looking at him. “Right?”

“Not really,” Harry said, shrugging. Adrian had never called him a *mudblood*, nor used *muddy* in a mean way. It was mostly for shock value. If he thought Adrian was actually prejudiced, it would be another story. “But you should know that Malfoy’s getting detention with Filch.”

Adrian stared at him incredulously. “Yeah, but he said it in front of the whole school. He’s a dipshit.”

“He’s making us all look bad,” Terence said, yawning. It made Harry yawn too.

“Flint wasn’t happy with him,” Cassius said. “With the game in a week.”

Terence made a noise of agreement, then hid under his blankets.

Harry went to the bathroom to shower and change, and by the time he was done his roommates had fallen asleep. He climbed into his bed, shut the curtains, and spelled them imperturbable. He didn’t feel much like sleeping, and didn’t know if he could.

If it wasn’t some joke in poor taste, the easiest way to figure out the Chamber of Secrets and Heir of Slytherin situation would be to ask Salazar Slytherin himself. There were no portraits of him to ask, however, as it had only come into style to memorialize people in portraits within the past few centuries. Most portraits were the artist’s impression of the subject, though some were trained by the subject themselves to emulate them. None of the founders had portraits, the enchantments hadn’t even existed during their time. And in the thousand years since, the lack of evidence for the existence of the Chamber, other than the myth itself, didn’t bode well for Harry’s prospects.

He laid down and stared at the ceiling, watching Frankie do her laps above him, thinking.

The Chamber and the monster it allegedly contained were said to be created and controlled by Salazar Slytherin.

Harry and Monty had heard a voice which neither Hermione nor Ron could. Either they had preternaturally good hearing, or it was something only they could hear. Or something only they could understand. He looked at his bedposts, which bore a snake motif as many Slytherin things did. Salazar Slytherin was strongly associated with snakes, and he was famously a parselmouth.

Frankie passed by again.

Harry sat up.

It was a snake. Salazar Slytherin was a parselmouth, and it was said parselmouths could control snakes. What better choice for a monster than some kind of serpent? Harry didn’t think he was a parselmouth, it had never come up. Yet he had Frankie, a fish who legends said could understand every language.

Harry grabbed his wand. McGonagall had introduced the topic of inanimate conjurations that year. Animal conjuration was NEWT level, but Harry had the basic idea.

“Serpensortia.”

A small, curled up snake appeared on his bed, caked in dirt. It hissed indignantly.

“Sleep...cold...”

Harry stared at it in shock. He thought it might be an adder, with brown scales and a black zipper pattern down its spine.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “Were you hibernating?”

The snake ignored him.

“Can you understand me?” Harry asked.

Frankie worked in a strange way. He could still hear the person, or snake in this case, speaking their own language, and Harry could comprehend the meaning. As such, he could tell he wasn’t hissing at the snake. Feeling foolish, he attempted to hiss, which only agitated the snake. It didn’t sound much like parseltongue, though he only had this little adder as an example, and perhaps the voice in the walls.

Now Harry had an annoyed snake on his bed. He didn’t know the spell to send it back to wherever it came from. Moving slowly, he dug an old jumper out of his trunk and carefully laid it over the sleepy snake. The snake hissed irritably, but was too lethargic to react. It was clear they weren’t mutually intelligible, that the snake couldn’t understand English at all. Perhaps Harry had been a little too hasty.

Once the snake had been relocated to his trunk—it was supposed to be hibernating, it would be fine for the night—Harry was left with another conclusion. If the monster was a serpent of some kind, Monty had been able to understand it. Which meant, unless Monty *also* had a babelfish tucked away somewhere, he was a parselmouth.

The Owlery was cold and dark. Owls huddled together for warmth, though a few were watching Harry warily. He didn’t blame them, he did have an adder with him. He looked out of the window, and caught a flash of white, stark against the night sky.

Hedwig flew to her perch on silent wings, hooting softly in greeting.

“Is he coming?” he whispered.

She clacked her beak, then turned her head to watch him with one bright yellow eye.

“You can’t eat this one,” Harry said, looking at the jumper hovering in the air next to him. The adder was balled up within.

Harry knew he had to move fast to speak with Monty alone. People were certain to send owls home about the events the previous night, and going to the Owlery was a plausible destination for both of them. Not that Harry ever sent letters to people.

He sighed, watching the staircase. He doubted anyone else would be up so early. He even thought it would be too early for his brother, but needs must. The sooner he had confirmation, one way or the other, the better.

Based on Monty’s nonreaction to the words on the wall, he had no idea what the Chamber of Secrets was. Draco did, he understood immediately. Every Slytherin did. He doubted Gryffindors traded stories about the founder of their rival house. Their History of Magic class had a sedative effect. Harry had the sense no one had bothered to tell his brother certain critical things, and without context or motivation, there would be little reason for his twelve-year-old brother to read about thousand-year-old events.

A noise from the staircase drew his attention, and he saw Monty emerge from under his invisibility cloak.

“I thought it was you,” Monty said, smiling a little. He looked exhausted, having had only a few hours of sleep. Harry felt bad for waking him so early, but he couldn’t waste time. To his surprise, as Monty approached him he pulled out a familiar cloak. The color-changing charm had faded, returning it to its original forest green.

“Sorry for not giving this back sooner,” Monty said, handing it to him. Harry took the cloak, holding the warm wool to his chest.

“Thanks,” he said, putting it on. It made him feel a little better.

“It’s a really nice cloak,” Monty said. “Hermione said it’s been charmed?”

Harry smiled. “Yeah. Did you burn the note?”

Monty nodded. “Though I don’t know why. You didn’t even sign it.”

“Just in case,” Harry said. He’d drawn a little thestral instead of putting his name, hoping it would sufficiently identify him. “Sorry for getting you up so early, but there are some things I need to explain from last night.”

“What’s that?” Monty asked, pointing at the floating jumper.

“The first thing I wanted to check,” Harry said, moving it closer to them. The snake grumbled, and Monty raised his eyebrows.

“*Too cold...*”

Harry carefully pulled back the jumper, exposing the snake. “Have you ever talked to a snake before?”

Monty nodded. "Yeah, I talked to a boa constrictor at the zoo once. It was before Hagrid... before I knew I was a wizard. I sort of set it free without meaning to."

Harry smiled faintly. "Could you try talking to this one?"

"*Hello,*" Monty hissed.

Harry kept quiet, despite how absolutely gobsmacked he was. His brother was a parselmouth. How? Why? What did it mean?

"*Sleep...*"

"I think she's tired," Monty said, frowning.

"She's supposed to be in hibernation. I was testing a new spell and ended up conjuring her," Harry said. "I need to look up the vanishing spell to send her home."

"You wanted me to talk to a snake?" Monty asked. "Why? You could understand her too, right? I bet loads of people can."

"I can't speak parseltongue," Harry said. "In fact, I doubt there are any other living parselmouths."

"Parseltongue?" Monty asked.

"It's a magical language spoken by snakes," Harry said, smiling at him. "It's remarkable you can speak it. However," he said, hating that he had to take the wonder away, "parselmouths have long been associated with dark magic. So if people know you're a parselmouth, they might think you're a dark wizard."

"But I'm not," Monty protested. "Are you sure I'm actually speaking parseltongue? I didn't hear anything different. How can I speak a language without knowing?"

"It's magic," Harry said gently. "The same way I could understand different languages because of Frankie."

"Frankie?"

"The fish I had," Harry said. He wanted to be able to trust Monty, but he was twelve and there were people in the world who could take information right out of his head.

"You named your fish Frankie?" Monty asked, laughing a little.

"It's from a book I really like," Harry said. "Anyway, with what happened last night, if people find out you can talk to snakes, they'll think you're the Heir of Slytherin."

Harry walked over to sit on a windowsill, one of the few spots without feathers or owl droppings, and Monty joined him.

"Is that what that message meant?" Monty asked.

Harry sighed. "I'll tell you the legend of the Chamber of Secrets."

He explained to a wide-eyed Monty about the foundation of Hogwarts as a sanctuary for magical children, how Salazar Slytherin objected to the inclusion of muggleborn students either out of baseless prejudice or valid concerns about their entanglements with the muggle world, or perhaps both. How he had allegedly built the Chamber to contain a monster which would purge the school of students he deemed unworthy.

Monty was silent for a while, looking out of the window. The sky was still dark, and the grounds were silent.

"The Sorting Hat said I'd do well in Slytherin," Monty said quietly. "Maybe I *am* the Heir of Slytherin."

Harry laughed, and Monty blushed, glaring at him.

"You're not," Harry said. "You could look up the Potter genealogy, I bet it goes back to the founder's time. If the Potters were descended from Slytherin, everyone would know about it. There's a Hufflepuff in your year, Smith I think, who never shuts up about being related to Helga Hufflepuff." According to Cedric, at least.

Monty looked away again. "Hagrid told me there wasn't a witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin."

"That's not true either," Harry said, a little frustrated. He could have been in the same house as his brother, and some careless words from the gamekeeper had swayed him to Gryffindor? He hadn't expected Monty to be in Slytherin, and with Draco Malfoy it would have been a recipe for disaster. Still.

"It's not?" Monty asked.

"No," Harry said. "There are plenty of witches and wizards from other houses who have done bad things. One of the most infamous Death Eaters in Azkaban was a Gryffindor."

"Death Eater?" Monty asked. "What's a Death Eater?"

Harry didn't react. It wasn't Monty's fault he didn't know, at least not entirely. "That was what Voldemort's followers were called."

He debated telling Monty about Sirius Black, but he didn't want to add another weighty revelation. Black was in Azkaban, he wasn't going anywhere.

"You should go back to your dormitory," Harry said, standing up. "You can get a few more hours of sleep."

Monty nodded absently, then looked up at Harry. "Why did you want to meet in secret?"

"Because I had a suspicion," Harry said. "And your ability is something you don't want to tell people. I would suggest not telling your friends either. Weasley is kind of a loudmouth."

Monty grimaced. “You really think they’d think I use dark magic?”

“If they’re your friends, they should know you better than that,” Harry said. “But other people won’t. This is the kind of thing that would make headlines in the *Daily Prophet*. It *definitely* would, given who you are.”

Monty looked unhappy with that assessment, but didn’t argue against it. “You’re probably right. But,” he said, giving Harry a piercing look, “what’s stopping you from telling people?”

Harry frowned in consideration. “What if I tell you a secret of mine? That way we both have something over each other.”

Monty thought it over for a moment, then nodded.

He wasn’t sure what he could tell Monty that wouldn’t reveal too much, and felt manipulative when he finally landed on something.

“One of my parents was killed by Voldemort,” he said.

Monty gaped at him. “I—”

“I’ve never told anyone that,” Harry said, rubbing his arms. It was harder saying it out loud than he thought. “So try to keep it to yourself, okay?”

Monty’s eyes blazed with determination. “I promise.”

Harry waited for his brother to leave first, not wanting to be caught together. He needed more time to think, because there were suspicions he didn’t dare tell Monty.

Monty hadn’t made the connection between being a parselmouth and the menacing voice in the walls. Perhaps he had been too tired to think about it. Harry had given him a rather lengthy history lesson to contextualize it.

Hedwig landed next to him, and allowed Harry to pet her.

He now knew for certain his brother was a parselmouth, and strongly suspected whatever voice they heard had been that of a snake. The legend said the monster could only be controlled by Slytherin’s heir. Even if either he or Monty were descended from Slytherin, neither had been controlling it. Someone else had, or it was controlling itself, and someone else had written the message on the wall.

Was there another parselmouth in Hogwarts? That there was one was incredible. *Two* parselmouths was entering the realm of fantasy.

He wished he knew the exact words the house-elf said. He should have asked Monty about it. Why would the Chamber open now? Why not last year, or the one before? What was new in the castle that year? Lockhart? He couldn’t exactly hold up a snake to him and demand he try to talk to it. Burbage? She was a muggleborn, unless she had some distant Slytherin squib in her family tree. There were also the first-years, but what first-year would even know where the Chamber of Secrets was when a thousand years of searching had turned up nothing?

Maybe there wasn't a Chamber at all, or maybe it was a metaphor for awakening, or setting loose, the monster. A thousand year old monster?

Harry wrapped his arms around himself, ignoring Hedwig's annoyed hoot. Maybe it wasn't a person. The voice was moving through the walls, or inside of them. Was it Voldemort again, possessing someone like he had with Quirrell? Harry didn't know if Voldemort was a parselmouth, though. Maybe some artifact of Salazar Slytherin's had possessed someone. There had been all those Ministry raids over the summer, who knew what had been unearthed.

He did know someone who could answer his questions. Someone who had known Voldemort. And maybe he didn't have to give away Monty's secret ability to protect him.

Severus was woken hours before dawn. He hastily got out of bed, summoning a robe to put over his nightshirt. Had there been another petrification?

He hurried through his office and opened the door, surprised to see Harry standing there in a familiar green cloak. His son looked exhausted, and Severus suspected he hadn't slept at all. A rumpled jumper was floating steadily next to him.

"What is it?" he said, ushering Harry inside.

"I have a theory," Harry said. "But I wanted to confirm something with you first."

"Did it need to be at five in the morning?" he asked, sitting down at his desk. He knew the house-elves were up in the kitchen, they never really stopped working with so many mouths to feed. He called for tea, gesturing for Harry to sit.

"The sooner the better," Harry said, huddling in Lily's old cloak. "Was the Dark Lord a parselmouth?"

Severus sat back. "How could you possibly know that?"

He had heard the rumors before joining the Death Eaters, but a rumor that a powerful wizard was a parselmouth was far different from actually hearing that wizard speak parseltongue. It had sounded almost demonic, that chilling, sibilant language, the writhing serpents in the shadows.

"So he was," Harry said darkly. "They never mention that in the books."

"Few had confirmation," Severus said. "Those closest to him did."

Harry looked up at him, but didn't comment on his admission. "My theory," Harry said, "is that Slytherin's monster is some kind of serpent."

Severus nodded. Harry wasn't the first to think that, it was a common theory, and the most obvious choice for a parselmouth. What *kind* of serpent was the question. Something Salazar Slytherin had acquired? Some new monster he created? Or was it a complete fiction?

"I believe the voice I heard is speaking parseltongue," Harry said, reaching for the jumper. He lifted a sleeve to reveal a coiled snake. "I can understand it. I also don't know the spell to vanish the snake I conjured."

Severus picked up his wand. "It's *vipera evanesca*," he said, demonstrating the spell. The snake vanished.

"Thank you," Harry said, taking his jumper from the air. "I believe it is a serpent, and I believe that, if the Dark Lord is a parselmouth, it is possible he has possessed someone else this year and is behind what happened to Mrs. Norris."

A small tea service appeared for the two of them, and Severus poured for them both. He didn't want to immediately write off Harry's theory, but it was clear his son was operating on very little sleep and was not at his most rational.

"Why would the Dark Lord target Filch's cat?" he asked.

Harry stared at his tea. "I don't know, sir."

Severus sipped his own. "Have you slept at all, Harry?"

Harry frowned. "I'm not...enfeebled."

"I'm not aware of any serpents which petrify," Severus continued. "Nor any that travel through walls."

"Dad..."

Severus sighed. "You need to sleep, at least a few hours. We can discuss this at a more reasonable time."

Harry looked into his tea. "Did you dose me?"

Severus smirked. "Not yet. If that's a concern, work on detection and identification."

Harry shook his head, then sipped his tea. "I don't think I *can* sleep," he said softly.

Severus stood and walked back into his private quarters, unlocking the cabinet where he kept his personal stock of potions. After Lily's death, he spent days, weeks, months brewing and consuming his own creations, Dreamless Sleep featuring heavily. If he wasn't allowed to die, he could at least sleep through it all. He rarely used it in recent years, but still kept some on hand. He picked up a bottle, examined it, then decanted a portion into an empty vial.

Back in his office, he passed the small dose of Dreamless Sleep to his son.

"When you get back to your dormitory, take that," he said.

Harry looked at the vial in his hand. “May I tell you my other theories?”

Severus looked at Harry. Normally he would never indulge a student who woke him so early in the morning to talk about a mythical, mysterious creature and an ancient legend. He had already come to terms with Harry being an exception to his carefully cultivated rules, and that he would make a number of allowances for the boy. For his son.

Harry was tired, anxious, had come across a message written in blood in a macabre display, alongside a younger brother he couldn't acknowledge or even be overly familiar with. Harry needed to rest, but he also needed to talk about whatever had been keeping him up all night. What would be best for him?

Severus sighed and picked up his tea again. “Very well. What are your other theories?”

Sons and Heirs

Chapter Summary

November 1992

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Severus Snape was many things, but at the moment Harry thought he was most aptly described as a right git. An unscrupulous man who had dosed Harry with enough Dreamless Sleep to put him out for sixteen hours.

He woke up halfway through dinner feeling like a wrung out rag, yet for the first time in weeks Harry was well-rested.

No wonder Dreamless Sleep was addictive.

A tray appeared on his bedside table bearing food.

His dad had known how much to give him down to the minute. He couldn't help but be impressed. A potions prodigy was teaching them. No one had any idea how lucky they were.

His absence the day before hadn't gone unnoticed.

Conversations stopped when Harry walked in from the entrance hall. Hundreds of eyes followed Harry's progress to the Slytherin table. He was only walking to breakfast, yet this was of immense interest to everyone.

Harry glanced at the Hufflepuff table and saw Cedric watching too, but the other boy quickly looked away. Harry tried not to show how hurt he was by this. He bore the scrutiny as best he could as he was swept along by his friends, reminding himself this was daily life for his younger brother. Monty was viewed with a sort of reverence and awe, whereas the current atmosphere in the Great Hall was more...hostile. Ravenclaws leaned away from them as they passed, which Astrid snorted at.

"It was like this all day yesterday," Astrid muttered, sitting them so their backs were to the other tables. "People were saying you were expelled, or that you'd been arrested by aurors."

“I was asleep,” Harry said.

“That’s what we told people,” Terence said, looking around the room. “Not that anyone wants to talk to a Slytherin.”

“It spread like wildfire,” Cassius said, seemingly unaffected by the simmering tension in the room.

“Donkeys,” Adrian said loudly, sitting down next to Harry. His friends were closing ranks. Mrs. Norris’ impersonation of a statue had pushed Slytherin into full isolationism.

“Anyone with half a brain would know our resident *muggleborn*,” Adrian continued, sneering at a nearby Ravenclaw—the little blonde girl smiled and waved at him—“isn’t the Heir of Slytherin. Bloody idiots.”

Harry looked around at his friends. Phoebe and Jasmine were huddled close together. He couldn’t imagine experiencing bigotry in both the muggle and magical worlds. Now they were part of a house that, in the course of a day, was being accused as a whole of being blood purists. He knew his friends. It didn’t make sense that anyone would think of them like that.

“Wait,” Harry said, realizing what Adrian had just said. “People think *I’m* the Heir?”

“It’s mad,” Jasmine said quietly, her eyes darting around the room as if their fellow students would suddenly take up arms. “Absolutely mad.”

“What about Potter and his mates?” Harry asked.

“He’s not in Slytherin, is he?” Astrid said, pressing against him.

“They’ve lost the plot,” Phoebe said, smiling weakly at him. “If anyone spent any time thinking about it, they’d realize no one in Slytherin would hurt Mrs. Norris and leave a message written in blood to boast about it. It lacks subtlety.”

“I like cats,” Harry said distantly.

“It’ll blow over in a week,” Cassius said offhandedly. Thankfully, owls began showing up. It was like a spell had been broken, and people had suddenly returned to their normal behavior. Harry didn’t buy it, nor did he think anything would be blowing over. It was optimistic of Cassius, and kind of him to say so, but Harry knew things Cassius didn’t. He had heard the voice in the walls.

By midweek nothing had blown over. The gawks and stares continued to bombard Harry, and to a lesser extent other Slytherins. Slytherins were, on the whole, being avoided. The reaction to this in Slytherin itself was multifarious.

Some people, like Draco Malfoy, thought the whole thing was hilarious, particularly a muggleborn being an Heir of Slytherin. He hadn't laughed when Harry told him his detention was with Filch, nor when he spent hours every night under Filch's watchful eye trying in vain to scrub the message off the wall. The words were impervious to all attempts at cleaning, even with liberal application of Mrs. Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover. It left the entire second floor smelling like a dentist's office.

Others, like Cassius and most of the upper years, acted as if nothing was going on. It was business as usual at Hogwarts. Some, like Jasmine, Terence, and a few of the younger years, became more withdrawn and reclusive. Still others took to mocking their skittish peers, Astrid and Adrian being Harry's most valiant defenders. Astrid in particular was fond of asking people to speak up or repeat themselves if she caught them whispering about him.

A Hufflepuff first-year had full on run away from Harry on his way to the library that day, and as Harry walked through the quiet stacks he brooded over Cedric's vanishing act. He couldn't imagine Cedric thinking he was the Heir of Slytherin, or someone who would attack cats, or write cryptic messages on walls in indelible blood.

Harry was glad his brother wasn't experiencing similar treatment. He'd take the fall for Monty any day, it was his responsibility as an older brother. Moreover, Monty didn't deserve such treatment. He already had enough going on with the whole Boy Who Lived business, living with the Dursleys, Voldemort being out there somewhere—had anyone told Monty that? Harry wasn't sure—the upcoming quidditch match, and his school work.

He carried a few books back to a table in one of the more unassuming corners of the library. Harry wished he had taken *Care of Magical Creatures* so he had a better foundation to work from. He knew some kinds of serpents, both muggle and magical. He'd just met an adder the other day. But there were dragons and wyverns, occamies and runespoors, gorgons and basilisks. There was the possibility of Slytherin's monster *not* being a serpent, but then what had Harry and Monty heard? Mermish? Somehow he didn't think Monty had been teaching himself Mermish.

There were many other creatures which could cause petrification. Some could turn a person into stone, like a gorgon. Others could turn you into ice like the Scandinavian myrkalfar, or breathe a paralytic toxin like nundus and Canadian cat-sith. There were so many vectors for attack. Bites, scratches, vapors, eye contact. For the last, making eye contact typically resulted in death, as with basilisks and cockatrices. Harry had only been at his research for a few days, but so far his dad had been right. There weren't any recorded serpents that caused petrification.

Harry closed the *Bestiary of the Balkans* a little too firmly, frustrated. The monster was definitely not a drekalo, which literally scared people stiff with its cry. Sort of like a mandrake, now that Harry thought about it. Had someone nicked one of the mandrake toddlers from the greenhouse and used it against Mrs. Norris?

He scribbled idly on the parchment he had been taking notes on. Doodling was much more fun with magic, since you could charm the images to move, but Harry was writing lyrics from a song that had been stuck in his head lately. He wished he could listen to music at Hogwarts, other than the Wizarding Wireless Network. They never played muggle music.

I am the sun, and the air...

The song had come out when his gran had first been diagnosed. He was around six, and hadn't quite understood its meaning. Or the actual words.

I am the son

and the heir

Of a shyness that is criminally vulgar

I am the son and the heir

Of nothing in particular...

Harry was shaken from his musings when someone joined him at his table. It was Percy Weasley, looking harassed.

"I was curious who was singing in the *Annals of Alchemical Achievements of the Americas*," Percy said, looking over Harry's books. "Working on an essay for Care? I hadn't realized you were in that class."

Harry blushed, having been unaware he was making any noise. "Sorry, I should have used a silencing charm. And, no, I'm not in Care. I'm just doing some research."

"On the Chamber of Secrets?" Percy asked, taking a seat uninvited. Harry didn't mind at all.

"Yeah," Harry said. "The headmaster wasn't able to reverse Mrs. Norris' petrification, nor Professors McGonagall and Snape." He didn't bother mentioning Lockhart's presence. "It's possible a creature is the cause of it, but..."

But who had written the message? Harry thought.

"You should leave it to the professors to sort out," Percy said. "You don't want to get mixed up in this more than you already are."

Harry swallowed nervously. "You don't think I'm the Heir, do you?"

Percy scoffed. "Unlikely. Your presence at the scene is merely that. Anyone could have stumbled upon it. Though, this," Percy said, tapping on the lyrics Harry had written, "is somewhat damning."

Harry blushed again. "It's from a song I like. A muggle song. By the Smiths."

Percy nodded. “Somehow I doubt Slytherin’s Heir, should they exist, would debase himself or herself by listening to muggle music.”

Harry was relieved Percy hadn’t joined the rest of the school in their new estimation of Harry Evans.

“A first-year Hufflepuff ran away from me today,” he said, trying to make it sound more amusing than uncomfortable.

“The lower years are all rather twitchy,” Percy said, shuffling some papers around. Harry caught a glimpse of a thin gold chain around his neck. He had been curious about the Time-Turner since his dad had mentioned them being handed out to certain students. Percy fell neatly into that category, given he had sat twelve O.W.L.s.

“Maybe you could make some time to talk to them,” Harry said, looking pointedly at the chain.

Percy narrowed his eyes and readjusted his robes. “The issue is how to reassure them. Muggle myths often had a basis in magical reality. It’s one of the topics we discuss in Muggle Studies.”

Harry smiled faintly at Percy, and noticed he had gone a little pink cheeked. “How’s that class going? Still good?”

They talked for a while about their classes, and Harry was grateful for the distraction. He was glad someone outside of Slytherin was treating him normally, even though he suspected Percy was sort of prefect-ing him, or making a point of acting like nothing had changed.

When the bell for dinner rang, Percy helped Harry put his books away and they left the library together, still discussing the influences that magic had on muggles. Professor Burbage had begun a unit on Greek mythology, particularly animagi and metamorphosis myths, such as Leda and the Swan and Lycaon, the king of Arcadia and first recorded werewolf. They weren’t happy stories.

Harry wasn’t paying much attention to his surroundings as they left the library, only following Percy as they talked. Their conversation came to an abrupt end when Percy froze at the top of a staircase.

“Ron!” Percy shouted, before storming down the corridor. It was then Harry noticed he had been following Percy upstairs, away from the Great Hall, without the faintest idea where they were going.

They were on the second floor, and Monty, Hermione, and Ron had just come out of the girls’ lavatory, right next to where Mrs. Norris had been found. The message was still there despite all of Draco’s efforts, and there was a chair where Filch sat to keep sentinel.

“That is a *girls’* lavatory!” Percy said as he swept towards his younger brother. “What were you doing in there?”

Harry followed at a more sedate pace, wondering why his own brother was lurking about the scene of the crime.

“Just having a look around,” Ron said, shrugging. “Clues, you know.”

It was too late, Percy was already worked up. “Get away from there,” he said, waving them away. “Don’t you care what this looks like?”

Ron didn’t budge. “Why shouldn’t we be here? We didn’t do anything wrong!”

“You think I haven’t tried telling Ginny that?” Percy said. “She’s still been crying her eyes out, worried you’ll be expelled! I’ve never seen her so upset. You might try thinking about her and what impact your behavior has!”

“You don’t care about Ginny!” Ron snapped, his ears turning red. “You’re just worried I’ll mess up your chances of becoming Head Boy!”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. It was true Percy was ambitious, and was a shoe-in for Head Boy, but he also cared deeply about his family. Harry had seen him comforting Ginny—or Ginevra, Harry wasn’t quite sure what to call the girl—and knew Percy did his best to mitigate the trouble Fred and George got into. He had gone after Ron when the troll was loose to make sure he was safe.

Harry knew that Ron was twelve, and lashing out, but to say Percy cared more about being Head Boy than their sister was going too far.

“Five points from Gryffindor,” Percy said. He was playing with his prefect badge, a nervous habit of his. Harry winced, because taking points would only serve to justify Ron. “And I hope that teaches you a lesson! No more detective work, or I’m writing mum.”

“Like you did with Fred and George?” Ron said. Hermione and Monty had been completely forgotten, and were looking nervously at each other.

“That was Hagrid,” Percy said curtly, going as red as his younger brother. “Would you blame me if I had? If you were in my position, you’d be writing her too!”

Percy strode off, apparently done with his brother. Harry was left with the three kids, a fuming Ron and a discomfited Monty and Hermione.

“He’s right, you know,” Harry said to them. “Returning here is a bad look.”

Ron glared at him. “You’re here too! And why were you with Percy anyway?”

“We ran into each other in the library,” Harry said. He looked at Monty, who seemed more shaken than the others by the domestic the Weasley brothers just had.

“You have a cloak,” he said to Monty. “Use it.”

Monty’s eyes widened in understanding, and he nodded.

“We should get to the Great Hall before we’re missed,” Harry said, turning around to walk back the way he had come. “God knows we don’t need any more rumors.”

The library was becoming a refuge for Harry, though he worried his growing reclusiveness, more of a return to his pre-Hogwarts days, was adding fuel to the fire. Madam Pince was an unwitting ally, stalking through the shelves to toss gossipers out on their ears. The library was filled with secret rooms, hidden alcoves, and long forgotten collections no one ever checked. Harry could easily hide himself among the books, hoping no one took him off the shelf.

People knew he was in the library, and thus where to either find or avoid him. He wasn’t yet accustomed to this notoriety. In the past he had been the boy with the things on his teeth, or the top of his class, not the potential muggleborn-murdering heir of Slytherin. It was the difference between fame and infamy, two sides of the same coin or perhaps entirely different currencies, neither of which he intended to spend.

He looked up from his reading when he heard several people approach. He assumed it was his friends coming to flush him out and herd him into the Great Hall, and was instead surprised to see it was Monty with his friends.

“Alright, Evans?” Monty asked, smiling nervously.

“Good afternoon,” Harry said, closing his book. “What are you three doing back here?”

Hermione tucked hair behind her ear, but it sprang out again. “We had a question we wanted to ask you.”

“Go on,” Harry said, leaning back and gesturing for them to sit. They were skittish, and Ron particularly looked like he’d prefer to be elsewhere. Monty was the most at ease.

“We wanted to ask,” Hermione started, looking at Monty for help.

“Do you know who the Heir is?” Monty asked quickly. “Is it Malfoy?”

Harry stared at them for a moment, then started laughing. “No, definitely not.”

Hermione puffed up indignantly. “How do you know?”

“Like he’d even tell us,” Ron muttered.

Harry ignored him. “If you have to ask, you don’t understand how obsessed so-called pureblood families are with genealogy. If someone like Salazar Slytherin was Malfoy’s ancestor, everyone would know. They would *make sure* that everyone knew. Since I unfortunately share a house with Draco Malfoy, I and everyone else within earshot has been subjected to him regaling us with tales of the Malfoys.”

Harry closed his eyes, trying to recall what things Draco had said. He tended to ignore him. "I'm pretty sure the Malfoy's came to England during the Norman Invasion, which was after the founding of Hogwarts. Malfoy said something about some ancestor of his being a contender for Elizabeth I's hand. They were pretty close to muggle royalty, or tried to be. They've got a large estate in Wiltshire. You know," he said, sitting up. "You *are* in a library. You can try tracing Slytherin's descendents yourself."

"What about you?" Ron asked. "Are *you* the heir?"

"Ron!" Hermione hissed.

"What?" Ron said defensively. "He might be!"

Harry shook his head. "I'm not."

Monty shifted awkwardly then asked, "Do you know a lot about, um, pureblood families?"

Hermione and Ron looked at each other. Apparently this wasn't in their script.

"Some," Harry said. "Why do you ask?"

He'd already all but told Monty he wasn't descended from Slytherin, though hoped Monty would look into it himself. He couldn't admit how much he knew about the Potter family's history. It would come off like he was a stalker, not someone interested in his younger brother's background.

Monty hesitated. "Do you know where the Potters are from?"

Harry frowned, pretending like he had to think about it. "Your family's from Gloucestershire. Specifically Godric's Hollow. It's a small mixed muggle-magical village," he added, since the name obviously didn't mean anything to Monty. "There are other magical families from there."

"So you're positive Malfoy isn't the Heir?" Hermione pressed, as Monty had gone silent.

"I'm not sure there *is* an Heir," Harry said. "At least, I don't think anyone in Slytherin is. If they are, they're doing a good job of hiding themselves. I know Malfoy is rather...abrasive. You know his father has close ties to the Ministry?"

Monty and his friends nodded.

"How do you think his son attacking cats and writing messages in blood would reflect on him?"

Hermione pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I don't think he would put his father's job at risk."

Harry was fairly certain Lucius Malfoy didn't have a job, but didn't correct her.

"Thanks for talking to us," Monty said, standing up with his friends.

Harry smiled at him. "Any time."

The three second-years left, and Harry returned to his reading. A short time later, he heard someone else approaching. Thinking Monty had another question for him, he looked up and smiled.

"H-hello," Neville Longbottom stammered, hiding partially behind a shelf. "Sorry, I just saw Monty and them talking to you, so I thought..."

"Did you have a question too?" Harry asked gently, wondering if this was some kind of prefect test to see how he dealt with lower years coming to him for help.

"Yeah," Neville said, taking a small step closer.

"About the Heir of Slytherin?"

Neville blanched. "No!"

"You should keep your voice down in the library," Harry said gently.

"Um, no," Neville whispered. Harry held back a sigh.

"What's your question?" he asked, smiling encouragingly. "You can sit down."

Neville shakily got into a seat. Harry had no idea why he was so nervous. Anxiety? Lack of confidence? Because of the rumors? Harry being an upper year, or a Slytherin?

"I heard you in the library a few weeks ago," Neville said, hunching like he was confessing to some heinous crime. "Talking about wands?"

Harry thought back on what Neville might be referring to. "You mean handedness?"

Neville nodded. "I'm left-handed too."

"Are you having trouble casting spells?" Harry prompted.

Neville nodded again, then gulped.

"Let me see one," Harry said. "Can you try *lumos*?"

Neville got out his wand, then looked around.

"Go on," Harry said. "No one ever comes back here." Except a parade of Gryffindor second-years, apparently.

The Wand-Lighting charm was the first thing Flitwick taught first-years. You simply held out your wand and said the incantation.

"*Lumos*," Neville whispered. A light appeared at the tip of his wand, though it was weak and flickering. Neville ducked his head in shame.

“You can stop it now,” Harry said, watching as Neville muttered *nox* and the light went out.

It was strange. There was nothing obviously wrong with his posture, and the spell *had* worked. Why hadn’t it been a successful casting?

Harry looked at the way Neville held his wand, like it was a priceless artifact, and a suspicion began forming.

“Is that your wand?” he asked.

Neville shook his head. “It’s my dad’s wand. Ash and dragonheart string.”

Harry kept his face neutral. “I’m sorry, Longbottom, but that wand is never going to work well for you. You’ve heard that the wand chooses the wizard?”

Neville nodded, his eyes welling with tears.

“You need to get your own wand. You’re your own person. The only reason that wand works for you at all is because it was...because it *is* your dad’s, and your dad cares about you.”

“Gran won’t let me,” Neville muttered.

Harry couldn’t fathom why, but didn’t want to push Neville into talking about it. He didn’t know the kid at all. “You don’t have to tell her,” he said.

Neville sniffled. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you could buy it on your own. The holiday is coming up, say you want to get a present for her then go to Ollivander’s instead. Or do it over next summer. She’ll have to give you pocket change for Hogsmeade, yeah?”

Neville looked skeptical about this suggestion. “Isn’t that sort of, um, lying?”

Harry shrugged. “It’s sneaky, maybe. Or is it being brave and standing up for yourself? It depends on how you think about it, and why you’re doing it. You can either keep using a wand that doesn’t work for you, or do something about it.”

Neville took a tremulous breath. “Okay. What about the stuff you were saying, about doing different wand movements?”

Harry smiled and got a fresh piece of parchment. He was glad he’d learned those animation charms from Jasmine, it made teaching wand gestures much easier. “Sure. What spells are you having a hard time with?”

Monty glanced at Percy, who was aggressively polishing his prefect badge in a corner of the common room. Ron had insisted they take the seats furthest away from him.

It had been both embarrassing and pointless going into the second-floor girls' lavatory, or Moaning Myrtle's bathroom as Hermione had called it. It didn't even make sense asking Myrtle questions, as they had just seen her at Nearly Headless Nick's deathday party.

It was sort of his fault they had been caught, since he had insisted they poke around for clues. He should have had his invisibility cloak, Evans was right. Not that it had mattered in the end. All they had found were some weird spiders and Myrtle, who had obviously seen nothing that night, what with the party and hiding in a toilet.

They could have got into a lot more trouble if it hadn't been Percy who had caught them. If Ron hadn't talked back to him, they wouldn't have lost any points either. And now everyone was in a bad mood and they didn't even have anything to show for it.

Ron was working on his Charms assignment but kept smudging the ink. He tried to spell it away but instead set his essay on fire. Ron growled, then slammed his book shut. Monty was surprised to see Hermione do the same.

"Who can it be though?" she said, worrying her bottom lip. "Who'd want to frighten all the squibs and muggleborns out of Hogwarts?"

"Let's think," Ron said mockingly. "Who do we know who thinks muggleborns are scum?"

"If you're talking about Malfoy—"

"Of course I am!" Ron said, sitting up. "You heard him. 'You'll be next, mudbloods!' Come on, you've only got to look at his foul rat face to know it's him!"

"Malfoy, the Heir of Slytherin?" Hermione said skeptically.

Monty shut his own book, turning the idea over in his head. "Look at his family," he said. "The whole lot of them have been in Slytherin, he's always boasting about it. They could easily be Slytherin's descendents. His father's definitely..."

Monty would have said *evil*, but he didn't think *all* Slytherins were evil. There were some good ones. Not Lucius Malfoy, though. He had been one of Voldemort's followers. So George had said, which he'd heard from Mr. Weasley.

"They could've had the key to the Chamber of Secrets for centuries," Ron said. "Handing it down, father to son."

"Or mother to daughter," Hermione said. She frowned thoughtfully. "I suppose it's possible."

Monty shifted, wondering if there was a way they could find out. “We could ask someone from Slytherin.”

Ron gave him a scandalized look. “Like they’d tell us the truth! We don’t even know any Slytherins!”

“That’s...I mean, I know one,” Monty said, looking between his friends.

“You mean that fourth-year?” Hermione said, tilting her head.

Monty nodded. “Yeah, Harry Evans.”

Ron got a calculating look, like he did when he was about to checkmate. “You reckon *he’s* the Heir? Bit strange for him to be following us, yeah?”

Monty shook his head. “I was shouting and running around. He was probably just curious. Anyone would be.”

And—he couldn’t say this to Ron or Hermione—Harry Evans was *nice*. He had helped Monty out before, though for some reason he wanted to keep it a secret. Monty hadn’t told Ron or Hermione about what had happened in Knockturn Alley, or where he had got the cloak from. He thought it must have been important to Evans, based on his expression when Monty had given it back, and Monty felt guilty for not returning it sooner.

There was something about Harry Evans that Monty couldn’t quite articulate. He didn’t treat Monty like a celebrity, or a legendary wizard, or an animal at the zoo. He treated him like... like he was just Monty.

“We should ask him,” Monty said decisively.

Ron didn’t look convinced, but Hermione said, “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt.”

It was settled.

Hi!

I wasn't planning on doing any Monty Potter (canon Harry) POVs, but I do have some notes on what takes place in the background. I happened to have a snippet taking place in this chapter, which I've expanded on. I hope you like it!

Aeromancy

Chapter Summary

November 1992

Everyone was rooting against Slytherin.

There wasn't anything new about that. Harry had got used to the other houses banding together to oppose Slytherin in quidditch. But as Harry sat in the stands with his friends, watching the teams walk onto the pitch, he noticed there was a frenetic edge to the cheering. It had only been a week since the attack on Mrs. Norris, and it was still at the forefront of everyone's minds.

Harry tried not to pay attention to the rumors about himself, and his friends did their best to insulate him from the worst. He overheard someone claiming he had killed his own parents for a dark ritual; the number of people he told directly his mum was dead he could count on one hand, and he had a good idea who might have spread it around.

Professor Snape had become increasingly draconian as the days passed, most notably towards Hufflepuff. It was from an upper year Hufflepuff girl he'd heard the rumor about killing his own parents, a first-year Hufflepuff who had run from him, and he only had one friend in Hufflepuff. Someone he *thought* was a friend.

Harry doubted Cedric would be cheering for Slytherin that day.

Phoebe's frog croaked, and she looked at the sky. The air was oppressive and muggy, and the clouds had darkened ominously.

"I think it's going to rain," she said. The frog croaked again.

"That was the forecast in the *Prophet*," Harry said, picking his brother out of the group of players on the pitch. He was the smallest, barring Draco, so it was easy. Had anyone spelled his glasses impervious?

"You'd think being able to actually foretell the weather would result in more accurate forecasts," Harry said, wrinkling his nose as a cold drop of water hit him. "They're just about as good as muggle meteorologists."

"Muggles do aeromancy?" Cassius asked, sitting down behind them, along with Terence and Astrid. Harry knew Astrid had planned for them to be available as substitutions should an injury occur. Since none of them were in quidditch gear, it was obvious that idea had been shot down.

“Not really,” Harry said. “I think they use sensors—muggle technology to monitor things like atmospheric pressure and moisture. They’ve got satellites too.”

“Satellites?” Phoebe asked, petting her frog, who was still croaking.

“Things muggles put in space to take pictures,” Harry said. “They put a big telescope up there to look into deep space.”

“Interesting,” Phoebe said, squinting up at the sky.

“It’s too far away to see them,” Harry said, grinning.

“The game’s starting,” Jasmine said, patting her hair with a look of faint annoyance. The humidity was making it frizzy. She was the only one who had the foresight to bring an umbrella, though it was almost entirely lace, likely charmed to repel water.

Harry had taken a Calming Draught before the game, just in case. The sky rumbled as Madam Hooch blew her whistle. The players launched into the air, Monty rising the highest. Draco tailed him, flying just underneath Monty.

A bludger immediately sped towards Monty and he ducked, narrowly avoiding brain damage.

Harry reached for the second Calming Draught in his robes. So it was going to be *that* kind of game.

One of the Weasley twins batted the bludger towards Adrian, and Harry experienced a moment of worry for his friend. But the bludger never made it, coming to a halt in midair and switching directions, going after Monty again.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Harry muttered, watching as the same scene repeat as the bludger was hit towards Draco.

“Did you say something?” Phoebe asked, huddling with Jasmine under the parasol.

“What the fuck is Malfoy doing?” he said. “He’s just watching Potter.”

“He’s a shit seeker,” Astrid said. “But Adrian’s doing well.”

Harry had been too preoccupied watching the bludger targeting his brother to pay attention to the rest of the game. The rain was picking up, and Lee Jordan announced the game was sixty to zero, with Slytherin in the lead. He watched Adrian score another goal, sitting more comfortable on the Nimbus Two Thousand and One than he had at the beginning of the term. Wood was struggling to cover all three hoops and captain the team. Fred and George were circling Monty so the rogue bludger didn’t kill him, leaving the Gryffindor chasers vulnerable. It wasn’t looking good for Gryffindor. Harry hoped the game would end soon.

It was a common misconception that Severus didn't like quidditch because James Potter did. It was true that, when he was more naive and desperate to impress a certain girl, he had entertained the idea of joining the Slytherin team. His mother's inability to afford a broom was a not insignificant factor in barring Severus' efforts.

However, his reasons had nothing to do with his schoolboy rivalry. In general, he didn't care for sports.

This, perhaps, was related to his father being an avid fan of cricket, a sport nearly as tedious as quidditch. Football and cricket matches were constantly played on the radio, and on rare occasions his father would go to the local and watch the small television stuffed into some sticky corner, sparing Severus and his mother from his presence. It was childish to dislike something simply because his father liked it, he knew that, but some sports were terrible on their own merits. It wasn't the only divide between Tobias Snape and his frail, magical son, but it was a sticking point for the old drunk.

Outside of that, Severus found it immensely dull, sitting and watching the players fly around for hours. There were the occasional bright spots, namely when one of the seekers spotted the snitch, heralding the end of the game. Or when someone had tampered with the equipment in an effort to kill Monty Potter.

"That bludger has been tampered with," Severus said. McGonagall was sitting straight up, her eyes fixed on the game. "Minerva, your team captain seems incapable of calling a timeout. This is the second game which has been interfered with where Wood has not acted to protect his players. Perhaps a change of captain is in order?"

Just then, Oliver Wood called a timeout, and McGonagall smiled at him like a cat who had got into the cream.

"It's in good hands, Severus," she said loftily as they watched the Gryffindor team land to discuss something in the pouring rain. Surprisingly, the bludger had decided to stop going after Potter.

"I fail to comprehend Madam Hooch once again not recognizing outside interference," Severus said, watching as the woman approached the Gryffindor team. "She should at least call for an inquiry."

"She's the Harpies' trainer, Severus," McGonagall said tartly. "She's doing us a favor being here!"

"Bloody adjuncts," Severus said under his breath. "She could do us a favor by recognizing when equipment is being tampered with!"

Madam Hooch blew her whistle, and the game resumed. The bludger immediately went for Potter again.

Severus began to chant a general counter-jinx, watching Potter speed away from the relentless bludger, then a more complex one, not knowing exactly how the bludger had been enchanted. It wasn't working. The object was too fast for him to blast out of the air, and there was a risk of hitting Potter should he try.

"This game should be stopped," he said, ending the useless counter-jinx.

"If you wish forfeit," McGonagall said, "by all means. I usually leave it to the team captain's discretion. Wood has a good head on his shoulders."

Severus stared at her in disbelief. "Potter's soon not going to have any head on his shoulders at all!"

McGonagall tutted, then patted his knee. "He's an excellent flier, just like his father. Avoiding bludgers is part of the game, Severus. No need to get worked up over your own seeker not being able to keep up, even with that new broom of his!"

Severus glared at her hand, then turned back to the game. He was surrounded by idiots.

Harry gripped his robes, watching his brother do some frankly insane flying to avoid the bludger, while his housemates laughed and jeered.

"What the fuck is Malfoy doing?" Astrid demanded, standing up. "He's sitting there like a twat instead of looking for the snitch!"

"He doesn't even see the snitch," Terence said, sounding angrier than Harry had ever heard him. "It's right next to him!"

Harry squinted, barely making out a flash of gold right above Draco's head.

Monty had stopped midair, looking at Draco with a stunned expression. The bludger slammed into his elbow. Harry flinched, grabbing his own arm in sympathy. He knew how much a broken bone hurt, but that bludger had *shattered* Monty's elbow. His right arm was hanging limp and useless. How was he even still conscious?

"Shit," Astrid said as Monty began slipping from his broom. He righted himself somehow, and began speeding towards Draco. "That idiot, he just has to reach up!"

Draco swerved out of the way, and Monty made a wild grab, catching the snitch. He had apparently used all of his strength to do so, as he began hurtling towards the ground, only his legs keeping him on his broom.

It was too fast for Harry to react, but someone was obviously trying to slow the broom. The angle of Monty's descent changed slightly, and instead of crashing headfirst Monty skidded to a stop into the mud. He rolled off of his broom, the snitch still clutched in his hand.

Harry decided he rather hated quidditch.

He felt trapped in his seat when he wanted to run onto the field and make sure his little brother was alive. Gryffindors were swarming their team, while the Slytherin team landed nearby. Marcus started yelling at Draco, and the rest of the team looked just as furious.

“Gryffindor wins!” Lee Jordan announced. “One fifty to one forty!”

Harry didn’t care about the score, he cared about the distressing proximity of Lockhart to his injured brother.

It was only later, when the dejected Slytherin team had returned to the common room, when Draco fled to his dormitory, that Harry learned what had happened.

Lockhart had vanished all the bones in Monty’s arm.

He spent his evening debating which part of Lockhart’s anatomy to vanish. Certainly some appendages wouldn’t be missed.

Severus was woken up by a house-elf.

“Professor Snape told us to tell him if there was a strange house-elf,” she said, looking disconsolate. “We tried to stop him, Professor Snape!”

“Where?” Severus asked, sitting up.

The house-elf wrung her hands together. “At the quidditch game. Flopsy thinks he was in the hospital wing too!”

Severus scowled. It must have been house-elf magic enchanting the bludger. He couldn’t wait to hold that over McGonagall’s inflated head.

“Something else has happened, Professor Snape,” Flopsy said. “Headmaster wishes you to be at the hospital wing.”

“For what reason?” he asked, standing up and summoning a robe.

The house-elf shuddered. “There’s been another petrification.”

Severus sat in the staffroom with his colleagues, grimly pleased he had caught the headmaster and McGonagall trying to scuttle off to bed. A first-year muggleborn named Colin Creevey had been petrified, apparently while en route to deliver grapes to Potter while he regrew his bones. Severus had demanded they meet immediately.

“It is as we feared,” the headmaster said gravely. “The Chamber of Secrets has been opened again.”

“Again?” Flitwick squeaked. “You mean this has happened before?”

“Oh, yes,” Dumbledore said. “I’m afraid so. Fifty years ago.”

Hagrid made a strangled noise, and Severus eyed him. Did the gamekeeper know something?

“We need to inform Mr. Creevey’s parents,” Sprout said, looking at McGonagall.

McGonagall pursed her lips. “I will write to his family, though I’m not sure it is wise to tell muggles their child has been attacked by an unknown magical threat. We don’t want muggleborns to feel unsafe here.”

“They *are* unsafe,” Severus said. “Are you suggesting we lie to them about what has happened to their son?”

“We don’t know *what* has happened,” she said sharply. Her distress about one of her own students being attacked was evident.

“Clearly someone is behind the attack,” Severus said. “We should interrogate the students and determine who it is.”

“The question isn’t *who*,” Dumbledore said. “The question is *how*.”

“Would you care to elaborate?” Severus asked. “Perhaps a search of the dormitories would reveal how!”

Dumbledore shook his head. “No student is behind this attack, of that I am certain.”

“Searching their personal belongings is a violation of their privacy,” Sprout said. To his disgust, many of their colleagues agreed with her.

“I know you are eager to absolve your own house, Severus,” the headmaster said. “What you are asking could draw an inquest from the Ministry. Not to mention how the students’ families may react, given the recent raids.”

Severus scowled at him. “Why am I not surprised? You’ve always valued the vaunted privacy of the few over the safety of others.”

“Severus, these are entirely different circumstances—”

“And this policy has never backfired, I’m sure!”

The exchange had drawn curious looks from the rest of the staff. Remus Lupin's lycanthropy had been a well-kept secret. When Severus had discovered it, in a foolish act which could have led to his death, the headmaster had sworn him to secrecy. He still kept that confidence, even years later.

Dumbledore sighed wearily. "Severus, now is not the time for old grudges."

Severus clenched his teeth. "This has nothing to do with *grudges*," he hissed. "A muggleborn student has been attacked! The boy is lucky he wasn't killed! Lives are at stake!"

There was a beat of silence, and then someone spoke up.

"I agree," Charity Burbage said, a solemn expression on her normally cheery face. "Mr. Creevey has been attacked. We cannot stand idly by while his assailant is still on the loose. We need to protect our students."

Severus nodded, thankful for an ally. "Are you intending to simply let this play out, headmaster?"

Dumbledore watched them silently for a moment. "Perhaps we can establish some rules of conduct moving forward."

They spent some time discussing what safety measures to implement in light of Colin Creevey's petrification, which did nothing to improve Severus' mood. It didn't feel like enough. Any muggleborn could be next, and the next attack could result in death. His son was widely considered a muggleborn, though both he and Severus knew he wasn't. Would that matter to the supposed Heir?

Dumbledore held him back as his colleagues returned to their private quarters to reclaim what little sleep was left to them after such a night.

"You seem quite passionate about defending our muggleborn students," the headmaster said, smiling at him. "Does this stem from concern for a certain muggleborn student of your own?"

Severus frowned. "I can't imagine why you would think so. We have a duty to protect all of our students, regardless of house."

"I didn't mention houses," the headmaster said, eyes twinkling. "Severus, I know he may share a name with her, but they are not the same person. It is noble of you to want to make amends for past mistakes, but don't let it blind you. I would still like you to keep an eye on Mr. Evans."

"Do you believe he is behind this attack?" Severus asked incredulously, masking how startled he was. The headmaster had got terribly close to the truth. Did he suspect?

Dumbledore shook his head. "No. I cannot say how this is happening"

"Could it be the strange house-elf?" Severus asked. "I was informed a house-elf had enchanted the bludger during the quidditch game, and was later in the hospital wing. The school house-elves were unable to detain him."

The headmaster frowned thoughtfully. "If he was ordered away by his master, it would be impossible to capture the house-elf. It is their inviolable directive, to obey their master's command."

Severus sighed. "I still believe we should search the dormitories, and the entire school."

"We cannot do so without cause," the headmaster said, starting to walk away.

"Is this not cause?" he asked heatedly.

"Not for what you are suggesting. We would have to appeal to the Board of Governors first, and I don't think you've forgotten who, exactly, sits on that board?"

Severus gritted his teeth. No, Lucius Malfoy would not react fondly to his son's belongings being rifled through. He had a number of students problematic in that regard.

"Have a good night, Severus," the headmaster said.

Severus watched the headmaster climb the grand staircase, his long wooly dressing gown brushing the marble steps, his nightcap bobbing jauntily. An attack on a student reflected poorly on the school, but the headmaster most of all. Severus narrowed his eyes as the headmaster disappeared down a corridor. Was Dumbledore worried he would be ousted if external forces came to bear? Hogwarts would be more vulnerable should that occur.

Severus understood Dumbledore's delicate position, but in all honesty didn't care if it meant his son's life was at risk. Could he do his own investigation behind the headmaster's back? The ghosts, the portraits, the house-elves were all under the headmaster's purview. He also had classes to teach, and any independent action he took, ordering his Slytherins to be rounded up so he could sift through their belongings, would definitely get back to the headmaster, the Board of Governors, parents and other guardians, the Ministry...

Frustrated, he stalked into the dungeons. *Something* had to be done.

The mood in the castle had changed after Slytherin's defeat. The tenor of the Great Hall was different the morning after, the Chamber of Secrets and rumors of an Heir forgotten in the afterglow of Gryffindor's victory. People chatted happily, laughed openly, though Monty Potter was notably absent, having his bones regrown in the hospital wing. Harry had considered visiting him, but rejected it as a bad idea. It would only make his brother curious why he cared, especially since it was Harry's house team who had lost.

Conversely, the mood in Slytherin was as dreary as the weather. Draco had hidden in his dormitory for the rest of Saturday, after being loudly berated by Flint and other members of the team. Harry and his friends hadn't been the only ones to see the snitch right above Draco's head. It was embarrassing, and exposed how inexperienced Draco was. He was

clearly more interested in showing off his expensive broom and taunting Monty than in the actual game. It was an insult to people like Astrid and Terence, who devoted a significant amount of time to practicing and perfecting their skills. That they had lost by only ten points further stoked their fury.

Not only had Draco's thoughtless behavior cost them the first match of the year, and effectively ensured they wouldn't be getting the Quidditch Cup unless Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw suddenly turned into much better teams, but Gryffindor had got fifty house points for the victory. They now were leading in the House Cup, too.

Astrid and Adrian kept watching the entrance to the Great Hall, waiting for Draco to show his face.

"He doesn't have the audacity," Cassius said. "Imagine your father spending nearly four thousand galleons on brooms only to lose the first game."

Harry shook his head. It was a disgusting amount of money. He opened his mouth to say as much, but a bright *clink* drew his attention.

It was the headmaster, standing up to address them. He wore a somber expression.

"Good morning, everyone," the headmaster said. "Congratulations to Gryffindor on an astounding victory yesterday afternoon."

A cheer went up at every table except Slytherin.

"He loves pouring salt on the wound," Jasmine said, shaking her head.

"Unfortunately, I have some news I must share with you all," the headmaster continued. "I am sorry to say there has been another petrification. A student by the name of Colin Creevey was attacked late last night. He is currently in the hospital wing, in Madam Pomfrey's excellent care."

The Great Hall was dead silent. Harry felt himself grow cold. How many people would think Creevey was petrified in retaliation for Slytherin's loss? It was too big a coincidence.

"In light of this event," the headmaster continued, "your professors and I will be enforcing some safety measures. We strongly advise that you do not travel anywhere by yourself. You will be escorted to lessons by your prefects and professors. There will also be a strictly enforced curfew. Anyone found violating the curfew will be at risk of expulsion."

Harry glanced at the other professors as the headmaster kept talking. All of them appeared fatigued, their faces lined with the seriousness of the situation. Professor Snape looked incensed, though by what Harry was unsure.

When the headmaster sat back down, there was a loaded silence before the whispering started up. Harry could feel eyes on the Slytherin table, on him.

"Fuck me," Adrian said, looking uncharacteristically grave.

“A cat is one thing,” Phoebe said quietly. “But a firstie? That’s...that’s unhinged.”

“It doesn’t seem like much of a joke anymore,” Cassius said, looking at Harry.

Harry stayed silent. He had known a week ago it wasn’t a joke. He wanted to leave the Great Hall, go hide in the library, find some answers in its dusty tomes. But leaving would only make him look more suspicious, so he stayed in his seat and grimly ate his breakfast, not tasting a thing.

Protective Charms

Chapter Summary

November/December 1992

“I am not carrying that around with me,” Harry said, turning away from the orange studded with cloves Phoebe was shoving into his face. The smell was so strong it made his eyes water. “Where did you even get that?”

“I got ingredients from the kitchens,” Phoebe said, trying to stuff it into his bag. Harry yanked it away.

“Seriously, stop,” he said. “I appreciate the thought, but I don’t think an orange is going to keep the monster away.”

“The smell might drive it away,” Terence said, covering his nose.

They were sitting in Arithmancy, having been escorted by an irate Charity Lament. Their secret dungeon practice room had been discovered, and their gobstones team had been kicked out. At least his dad had been amused by the shrine erected for Eileen Prince, which Charity had supposedly reconstructed in her dormitory. Their practice sessions were up in the air, given no one liked it when they played gobstones in the common room. Harry had convinced two first-years to join their team, meaning it was the largest it had been in years at a staggering seven players. Or stoners, as Charity kept insisting.

“You’ve been carrying that around all day?” Harry asked as Professor Vector walked in. There weren’t many people in Arithmancy, only a few from each house. Oddly, George Weasley was taking it without his brother, and he was the only one brave enough to sit on the same side of the room as Harry and his friends. A few Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were on the other side, shooting them wary glances.

“You think *that* smells bad,” George said, leaning forward from the table behind Harry. “You should see what Neville’s been carrying around. He’s got a soggy scallion and a rotting newt tail.”

“Why?” Harry asked, but was interrupted when Professor Vector called for their attention.

“Good afternoon,” Professor Vector said, scanning the room. She was wearing robes of emerald green that day, presumably to make a statement. “Now, as I’m sure you are aware, there has been a sudden uptick in talismans and amulets circulating around the school. As I understand it, one of your professors has relayed a tale of providing the magical community

of Ouagadougou with amulets in response to a similar series of events. Whether it is fact or pure fiction, I leave to you to deduce.”

She gave Phoebe a pointed look, then set a box on her desk.

“I have acquired some of the amulets your fellow students have been selling in a bald effort to capitalize on a tragedy,” Professor Vector said, patting the box. “Today, we will put some of the theory we have been learning to practice. The question I present to you is this: do these amulets function as advertised? You will be working in pairs to construct a cogent antecedent and choose an appropriate methodology with which to evaluate. Pythagorean, Aggripan, or Hasidic. Now, for your pairs. Miss Alderton and Mr. Higgs, Mr. Evans and Mr. Weasley, Mr. Davies and Miss Endo, Miss Kirkby and...”

Harry gathered his things and moved to sit next to George.

“People are already avoiding me like the plague,” he said. “I don’t think I need a clove orange to help ward them off.”

“It doesn’t smell that bad,” George said. “Mum makes them around Christmas. I don’t think with that many cloves, though.”

“I notice you haven’t run screaming for the hills,” Harry said, taking one of the amulets Professor Vector had confiscated, a poorly transfigured purple crystal.

“My brother says a student can’t be behind it,” George said with a shrug.

“Which one?” Harry asked, examining the crystal. It didn’t look like anything special.

“The prefect,” George said. “He was trying to comfort some of the younger kids, I think. He’s started teaching them defense in the common room.”

Harry felt his face heat up. That had been one of Harry’s suggestions the previous year, when Quirrell was teaching Defense. Hopefully Monty was getting some use out of it.

“So,” he said, not noticing the shrewd look in George’s eyes. “How should we phrase the question?”

It was inevitable the business with Quirrell would come up again, only now people were saying Harry had killed him.

Harry tried to act like it didn’t affect him, but it did. He started having nightmares every night. The Mirror of Erised, the explosion, Quirrell’s broken and bloody body, the wraith of Voldemort, whispering to him.

Harry Evans...I will remember you...

Dreamless Sleep was a blessing and a curse. He couldn't take it every night, not only because of its addictive properties but because dreaming itself was important to his overall health, even if his dreams devolved into nightmares. Too much Dreamless Sleep would negatively impact his memory, and his mental state.

Harry never interacted much with people outside of Slytherin, barring joint classes, so it was strange to him that those in other houses still treating him normally stood out. Stranger still they were all in Gryffindor. He had a lot of classes with Fred and George. All of his core classes, and his electives. They seemed to have split the additional subjects between the two of them, but Harry suspected they switched places frequently. He could have lived without one or both of them telling people to *make way for the Heir* every time he entered a classroom, but they had confided in trying similar jokes to cheer up their little sister, who was taking her classmate Colin Creevey's petrification hard.

One week passed, and then another, and there were no new petrifications. Harry hadn't heard the voice again, but feared it was only a matter of time. And as the days passed, Cedric's absence grew more pronounced. He tried not to let it show how much it bothered him, but people had noticed. Everyone had noticed. He no longer studied in the library with Cedric, Cedric no longer went out of his way to run into Harry. He seemed to go out of his way to *avoid* Harry, and his friends would shoot Harry dark looks.

By the end of November Harry had had enough. He decided to confront Cedric, and got the opportunity one afternoon in the library. To everyone's frustration, mostly O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. students, the library's hours had been reduced. When people did go to the library, it was typically in large groups. Harry's more studious friends, namely Cassius and Jasmine, had taken to joining him most days, though that particular day Harry was alone. He had spotted a large group of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws who had taken over a few tables, with Cedric in the center.

It was nerve wracking approaching such a large, mistrustful group, but Harry wasn't sure what other chance he would have to talk to Cedric alone. With the curfew, there wasn't the time for it.

Harry stood before the group, gripping the strap of his bag and hoping he didn't look as nervous as he felt. Their various conversations stopped when he was noticed. Cedric was talking to a girl who Harry recognized as the Ravenclaw seeker, a pretty third-year named Cho Chang. It made his stomach lurch.

"Cedric," he said, feeling like he needed to clear his throat. "Can I talk to you?"

Cedric twitched at hearing his name. "I'm kind of in the middle of something."

Harry breathed out slowly. "It will only take a minute."

Someone started whispering to Cedric, a fourth-year Hufflepuff named Haruka Endo who Harry had thought was nice in first year, but had grown increasingly antagonistic with time. Probably because she fancied Cedric, or perhaps now because of the Heir of Slytherin thing.

“Alright,” Cedric said, standing up. “I’ll be right back,” he said to his friends. Or fans, Harry wasn’t sure.

Harry led Cedric a few aisles away, his stomach clenching with anxiety.

“Why have you been avoiding me?” Harry asked, thinking it was best to get it over with.

Cedric swallowed. “Our first quidditch match is coming up. I’ve been busy—”

“That’s not why,” Harry said firmly. “Do you honestly believe all the rumors about me?”

Cedric shook his head. “No, I’ve been trying to tell people that it can’t be you. But they won’t listen. Then people started thinking you’d done something to me to...”

Cedric rubbed his arm, looking at Harry helplessly.

“What?” Harry asked. “People think I used magic to make you...for you to...” Harry pulled back, repulsed.

“Someone thought it might be...” Cedric blushed, and lowered his voice. “A *love potion*, you know? Because you’re, well, *you*.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Harry asked. “Because I’m a bloke? Because I’m in Slytherin? What?”

“No,” Cedric said, shaking his head again. “Well, maybe. But you’re so smart, making a potion like that would be easy for you.”

Harry wasn’t sure what he should feel about that. He thought love potions were vile, and he couldn’t imagine a situation in which he’d want to use one. Was calling him smart meant to soften the blow?

“So that’s why you aren’t talking to me?” he asked.

“I wanted to prove that I’m not being influenced,” Cedric said miserably. “I’m sorry, Harry. This whole Heir business is awful.”

Harry scrutinized Cedric. “Was this your idea?”

Cedric hesitated, then said, “Not entirely, no. I wasn’t sure what to do.”

Cedric suddenly took Harry’s hands, and looked at him with such a glum expression it made Harry’s heart twist.

“I really like you, Harry,” he said. “I kept thinking it was a bad idea, but everyone was sort of egging me on, and with classes and quidditch and all the new rules, it’s just...I’m sorry. It built up into this whole thing, and it kept getting harder to talk to you.”

“You couldn’t have sent an owl?” Harry asked, not sure if he was ready to forgive Cedric. His reasons sounded incredibly stupid. So much for Hufflepuff loyalty.

“I thought it would stand out, since you never get any owls,” Cedric said. That also sat poorly with Harry. It was true, but a little insensitive to point out. “I kept telling people you were muggleborn, then they asked me who your parents were.”

Harry looked at their joined hands. “I don’t have any.”

“I know that,” Cedric said. “They know that. But no one knows their names.”

At least that answered Harry’s question about how word of his orphanhood had got around. Cedric had been trying to defend him, apparently.

“Does it matter?” Harry asked. “I don’t like talking about it. It’s not exactly a happy topic.”

“Yeah,” Cedric said. “Will you tell me though?”

Harry pulled back, but Cedric tightened his grip.

“I don’t mean now,” Cedric said hastily. “But one day?”

Harry looked down again. He didn’t know if he could. There were magical vows, though. Maybe he could, if Cedric agreed to one.

“Okay,” he said.

Cedric smiled brightly. “There’s a Hogsmeade trip right before the holiday. Would you want to go together?”

“Um, sure,” Harry said, a little thrown by the sudden change in topic. “Will your friends approve?”

Cedric pouted a little. “That shouldn’t have ever mattered. Don’t worry about it.”

Then, to Harry’s utter shock, Cedric swept in and kissed him on the cheek.

“I do have to finish an essay,” Cedric said, smiling warmly at him. “And I really do have quidditch practice. Maybe we can meet after the match?”

“Okay,” Harry said unsteadily. What had just happened?

“I’ll talk to you later,” Cedric said, releasing him. “I could even send an owl.”

“Okay,” Harry repeated, watching as Cedric disappeared around a shelf. He put a hand to his cheek. It felt warm.

“Who’re we supporting?” Astrid asked as they waited for the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw game to commence. There was snow on the ground, and their breath came out in clouds. Harry had his mum’s cloak on, warmed by charms his mum had cast nearly twenty years prior. Sometimes he imagined it was what being hugged by her would feel like.

“Ravenclaw,” Harry said, sharing a grin with Astrid. “Hufflepuff’s the better team, the better Ravenclaw does the further from the Cup they are.”

Astrid shook her head. “So you’ve made up with pretty boy?”

Harry hummed noncommittally. He wasn’t sure where he stood with Cedric. It had only been a few days since their conversation in the library. He believed Cedric had tried to stand up for him, but was disappointed he had ultimately caved to his friends. Friends who had never quite warmed up to Harry. He couldn’t fault them, the feeling was mutual, particularly with those who tried to drive a wedge between him and Cedric. It was taxing. Were relationships supposed to be so much work?

Harry sighed and settled in to watch the game. The Ravenclaw seeker wasn’t a match for Cedric, using a tactic less skilled seekers engaged in, tailing him around the pitch. Shadowing rarely worked out for a seeker, particularly if the opposing seeker had a superior broom or more experience. It could have worked for someone like Malfoy and his Nimbus Two Thousand and One, but that game against Gryffindor had shown how easily exploited that sort of mirror match was, and he’d tried it on an objectively better seeker.

“This is pathetic,” Astrid said, chewing on a pasty she had got from somewhere. Harry made a note to bring his own food to future games. “We’re well and screwed if either of their teams plays like this against Gryffindor.”

“This entire year is a wash,” Terence said. Draco’s failure had hit him the hardest. Terence wasn’t one to brag, but everyone knew had he been fielded as seeker, even on his Comet, the game would have ended much differently.

“And Chaser Davies scores,” Lee Jordan announced. “Again. The score is tied. Again.”

Astrid groaned. Harry wholeheartedly agreed. He got out a book to read, knowing it was going to be a long game. He liked watching Cedric play quidditch well enough, but felt he was a rather uninspired player.

Not that Harry would ever tell him that.

Cedric lacked a certain disregard for his own life which truly exceptional seekers had. He couldn’t picture Cedric pulling off any high speed feints, it wasn’t in his character. Maybe that was why Gryffindor and Slytherin had so many quidditch zealots. Courage and ambition made risk-takers of them all.

Harry had promised Cedric they’d meet after the game, no matter who won. He was happy for Cedric when he finally caught the snitch, outstripping Cho Chang, the point disparity putting Hufflepuff in the lead for the Quidditch Cup. The Hufflepuffs were certainly excited about it.

On the way back to the castle Harry split off from his friends, lingering within sight of the broomshed. He intercepted Cedric on his way to store his broom.

“Congratulations,” Harry said.

“Thanks,” Cedric said with a winsome smile. He looked around, then focused back on Harry. “I’m starving. Want to go to the kitchens?”

“Don’t they want you in the common room to celebrate?” Harry asked.

Cedric leaned closer to him, so their noses almost touched. “They can wait.”

When Professor Snape came around to collect the names of those staying for the holiday, Harry signed his name as usual. He had nowhere to go, and every member of his family was at Hogwarts. No one was eager to stay, even though it had been over a month since Colin Creevey’s petrification and there hadn’t been a hint of another attack. They were still shuttled from classroom to classroom, entrenched in their dormitories before curfew.

Astrid offered to stay at school with him, but Harry knew she wanted to see her parents and little sister. She even invited him for the holiday, but he had appointments and didn’t want to intrude on her family’s time. He wished he could give her more authentic reasons.

The professors seemed to think the best way to keep them out of trouble was to pile on the work.

“We just have to get through this,” Astrid said one evening a week before the end of term, pressing her quill so hard she was nearly cutting through the parchment. They had yet another essay due on goblin rebellions, specifically the Goblin Rebellion of 1612. It was notable in that the conflict had risen up around Hogsmeade. The goblins had been fighting for representation in the Wizengamot. They had got the Goblin Liaison Office about two hundred years later. That was equality.

“Just a few days until Hogsmeade,” she said, stabbing a full stop into her parchment. “Just a few days.”

Their slog through the last week of term was interrupted by a posting on the notice board in the entrance hall.

“It’s an announcement for a dueling club,” Cassius said, reading over the heads of the students clustered around the board. “Tonight, at eight.”

“Think it’s Flitwick?” Jasmine asked as they skirted the crowd and made their way to Ancient Runes.

“He *is* a world class dueller,” Cassius said thoughtfully.

“A champion,” Jasmine said. “You should see all the trophies in his office.”

“Doesn’t he supervise a few clubs already?” Harry asked as they ducked under a tapestry, taking a shortcut through an oddly twisted corridor.

“The timing is peculiar,” Cassius said. “I wonder if he had pushback? Taking on too many responsibilities.”

“Still worth checking out,” Harry said as they exited the strange passageway onto the sixth floor. There was some dueling in the common room as part of their house defense club, but usually it was just testing spells against each other. Not full on, proper duels. Maybe Cedric would show up. It would be interesting to see what he was capable of.

“Is this a joke?” Phoebe whispered as Gilderoy Lockhart swaggered onto the golden stage he had erected, a vision in plum robes. Professor Snape stalked after him like a vengeful spirit.

“It has to be,” Terence whispered back.

It seemed the entire school had turned out for the dueling club, only to be severely disappointed.

“Gather round, gather round!” Lockhart said, spreading his arms to silence them. “Can everyone see me?”

“Unfortunately,” Harry muttered. Astrid snickered.

Lockhart explained that he had got permission from the headmaster to start the dueling club, inviting them to purchase his published works for the full Lockhart experience. Professor Snape had volunteered to be Lockhart’s *assistant*.

“Maybe he’ll assist him straight to St. Mungo’s,” Harry said, watching as the two professors faced off.

“*Expelliarmus!*”

Snape’s overpowered Disarming Charm blasted Lockhart across the stage. He hit the wall with a magnificent *crack* and slumped to the floor.

Harry politely clapped as his fellow Slytherins jubilantly cheered. Lockhart gracelessly tried to save face, and soon gave it up to sort them into pairs. Snape seemed to take particular glee in sorting Gryffindors with Slytherins, pairing Monty with Draco, and Hermione with Millicent Bulstrode. Harry looked around hopefully for Cedric, but Lockhart was swanning through the Hufflepuffs. He found himself facing George Weasley.

“Lucky me,” George said, grinning at him.

Harry nodded.

“Wands at the ready!” Lockhart shouted. “When I count to three, cast your charms to disarm your opponent. *Only* disarm, we don’t want any accidents! One. Two. Three!”

Harry flicked his wand, wondering if George had ever even cast the charm before. “*Expelliarmus.*”

George’s face was a portrait of shock as his wand flew through the air and was neatly caught by Harry. Harry raised an eyebrow. What did George expect would happen?

“I said disarm only!” Lockhart shouted.

Harry had peripherally been aware of the chaos happening around him. Monty was dancing, Draco was laughing uncontrollably, Millie had Hermione in a headlock, Ron was on fire. There was a lot of smoke, sparks, crying, bleeding. Astrid had a feral look and was holding Fred Weasley’s wand. Adrian had been paired with Angelina Johnson, and there had to be some rivalry there Harry had missed because Adrian looked like he was out for blood.

“What the hell is going on?” Harry said, walking over to George to hand his wand back.

“You followed instructions,” George said.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Harry asked. “It’s not like we’re actually fighting.”

George shrugged. “To show off.”

Harry frowned. “What were you planning on casting?”

George smiled. It was a little sinister. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“That’s why I asked,” Harry said blankly.

“Stop! Stop!” Lockhart cried, having lost what little control he had over the room. “I think I’d better teach you how to block unfriendly spells. Let’s have a volunteer pair. Longbottom and Finch-Fletchley, how about you?”

Snape walked over to join Lockhart in the eye of the storm. “I would advise against that, *Professor* Lockhart,” he said. “It would be best for older students to demonstrate the more advanced spells. Perhaps one of my own students?”

Harry straightened when he realized his dad was looking at him.

“How about Evans and Weasley?” Snape suggested.

“An excellent idea,” Lockhart said quickly, waving Harry and George to the center of the room. As Harry got closer, he noticed Lockhart was sweating. It was probably the robes.

“It is an honor to duel the Heir,” George said, giving him a ridiculous bow.

“At least you’re prepared to make a spectacle of yourself,” Harry said, exasperated. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Lockhart counted them down. “Three, two, one. Go!”

“*Reducto!*” George said.

“*Protego!*”

There was a small explosion as the spells met, but Harry easily stood his ground.

“Really?” he said. “*Levicorpus!*”

George jumped to the side.

“You’re supposed to *block*,” Harry said, annoyed as a poor first-year was lifted by her leg. Harry quickly cast the counter before the kid got too high in the air, just as George cast, “*Mimblewimble!*”

Harry dropped to the floor to avoid it, thinking how idiotic it was to have their audience ringing them instead of using the ostentatious stage some overworked house-elves had created for them. “*Incarcerous!*”

Rope shot out of his wand, wrapping around George’s legs. He toppled to the ground

“Do you not know how to block?” Harry asked.

“Nope,” George said, pushing himself up. “But I know how to do this. *Serpensortia!*”

Harry watched as a very annoyed black cobra landed on the ground with a *thump*.

“*Vipera evanesca*,” Harry said, glad he’d learned the counter from his dad. He sent the cobra back to its home before it could start hissing. “So that’s how it’s going to be?”

George had set the ropes on fire to get them off, which, well, it worked. It wasn’t the ideal way to do it, but it worked, if one ignored the conflagration his robes were becoming.

“*Expelliarmus!*” Harry snapped, snatching George’s wand out of the air before the fire spread. “*Aguamenti*.” George spluttered as water blasted him in the face.

Harry didn’t mind overly much if George drowned. He was concerned about the tiny blonde Ravenclaw he had accidentally jinxed. He looked her over, but she seemed more amused by her brief flight than anything.

He glanced at Lockhart, who had a strained smile on his face. “Is that good enough?”

After the moderate fiasco that was the dueling club, Harry was looking forward to an empty castle. He wasn't fond of being put on display in front of so many people, but understood that as a known variable he was unlikely to be seriously injured by another student, as opposed to the unpredictable second-years.

A blizzard struck Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, so their Hogsmeade weekend was canceled. Saturday morning found Harry in the hospital wing, accepting his steaming, blood-red potion from Madam Pomfrey. He shuddered when he finished drinking it, feeling jittery. On the way out he passed by Percy, who nodded to him. Harry glanced at a window, but snow had piled against it, blocking the view. Harry pressed a hand to his forehead, feeling overheated despite the weather outside, a minor side effect of the potion. Having breakfast would help, but before he went to the Great Hall he stopped at the lavatory.

As he was washing his hands, Harry heard the voice again.

"...*blood*..."

Harry turned off the tap, frowning in concentration.

"...*I smell blood*..."

He swallowed. The potion he took had impundulu blood, it was one of the few ingredients he knew. His mouth still tasted like blood. Whatever was speaking had an extremely good sense of smell.

"...*let me kill you*..."

The ceiling juddered above him, then a chunk of it crashed to the floor.

Harry's mind raced. He had no conclusive proof of what Slytherin's monster could be. He took his wand out. He couldn't stop shaking. Whatever the creature was, it was gigantic. Harry shivered, gripping his wand. He had no idea what it was, or what it could do. He only had guesses, and he suspected those guesses were why he was being targeted.

Something heavy dropped on the floor, rattling the room. He could hear the sound of scales sliding on tile. A serpent then. Only the king of serpents for a parselmouth. All the spells Harry knew would be useless against it.

The first attack had been near a lavatory. The water. The camera. He had to *think*.

He wished he'd taken that orange from Phoebe.

"*Defodio*," Harry whispered, subtly moving his wand, hoping the creature wasn't intelligent enough to destroy the message he left.

He had to *know*. He had to trust his dad would find a way to unpetrify him.

If he survived.

When he was unpetrified, he could warn them.

The creature would kill him before he could turn around, he was certain of that.

Harry gripped the sink, took a deep breath, then looked into the mirror.

He saw a pair of savage yellow eyes.

And then the world stopped.

Chicken Gods

Chapter Summary

December 1992

The doors to the Great Hall slammed open, letting in a cold blast of wind. Severus looked up from his tea and saw Percy Weasley sprinting towards the staff table.

“Professors!” Weasley shouted. “Professors, there’s been—”

“Lower your voice, Mr. Weasley,” McGonagall said, looking around the Great Hall. Weasley’s antics had got everyone’s attention. The gangly prefect reached the head table and braced himself against it, panting.

“What’s the matter?” McGonagall asked, her face tight with concern.

“There’s been another petrification,” Weasley gasped, glancing at Severus.

His blood ran cold, and he looked at the Slytherin table. His son wasn’t there.

“Who?” Severus asked, though he already knew the answer.

Weasley took an unsteady breath, and Severus noticed the boy was pale and shaking. Had he seen the beast?

“Harry Evans,” Weasley said, closing his eyes. He reached into his robes, fumbling with a chain. “Professors, I have—”

“What’s done is done, Mr. Weasley,” Dumbledore said, standing up. “Students,” he announced, “There has just been another attack. All students will remain in the Great Hall until further notice.”

Dumbledore looked around at the staff. “Professors McGonagall and Snape will accompany me to the petrification site. The remaining staff will search the castle for any wayward students and bring them to the Great Hall. I want everyone accounted for. Mr. Filch, speak with the portraits and ghosts. Professor Sprout, please speak with the house-elves.”

“Yes, headmaster,” Filch said despondently. The man hadn’t been the same since Mrs. Norris’ petrification. Severus was beginning to understand. He felt as if the entire world had ended. His son...

“Where is he?” Severus demanded.

Weasley straightened and adjusted his glasses, regaining his composure. "This way, sir."

Severus followed Weasley out of the Great Hall, outpacing both the headmaster and McGonagall. The doors shut firmly behind them. Severus could barely get his thoughts in order. It had been years since he had felt such dread. He should have insisted action be taken. He should have pushed the headmaster, pushed McGonagall, done something, anything, to prevent his son from being taken from him.

Weasley led them to the boys' lavatory on the first floor, a short distance from the hospital wing. Harry must have stopped there just after receiving his potion. How naive they were, to assume their students were safe in the daylight.

"He's in here, sir," Weasley said, standing to the side of the door. Severus didn't question how Weasley had been the first to discover Harry, he was just glad someone had. He could have been overlooked for hours.

"Severus, if you would," the headmaster said softly.

Severus got out his wand and pushed the door open, bracing himself. Harry wasn't dead. He wasn't.

He saw Harry immediately. He was standing at a sink, eerily still, grabbing the porcelain and staring sightlessly into the mirror. His babelfish, Frankie, was visible again, and appeared frozen midair. Severus checked the room for threats, only finding a large hole in the ceiling and some shattered tiles beneath it. He slowly approached his petrified son. Harry had his wand in his hand. So he had suspected something. Perhaps he had heard the beast coming for him. Upon closer inspection, Frankie was still moving, but incredibly slowly. What did that mean?

"Why is he smiling?" McGonagall asked from his side. He hadn't noticed her approach.

Severus studied his son's expression. Harry *was* smiling, with grim determination. The moment of revelation had been perfectly captured. It was one of Lily's expressions, and it made his throat tighten with grief.

"He's smiling because he was right," he said when he was able to speak.

McGonagall gave him a strange look, but Dumbledore walked forward, bending down to look at where Harry's wand had been pointed. He straightened, then turned to Severus.

"It seems your student has left us a message," he said, smiling faintly. "Instead of defending himself, he acted to warn us."

"Foolish boy," Severus muttered, trying to hide the fondness in his voice. He walked over to see what his son had left for him to decipher, distantly aware that Weasley was still there and following him.

Severus leaned down to examine the mark Harry had left on the wall.

“That’s no rune I recognize,” McGonagall said, also looking at the symbol. She was right, it wasn’t a rune, at least not one taught at Hogwarts. Severus wasn’t sure what it was. It looked something like a wonky triangle with a hole in it.

“What could it possibly mean?” McGonagall asked, standing back and glancing up at the broken ceiling.

“I am unsure,” Dumbledore said, frowning. “I doubt Mr. Evans would leave us something impossible to interpret.”

Someone cleared their throat, and all three professors turned to look at Weasley.

“Perhaps one of his friends would know?” Weasley suggested.

“An excellent idea, Mr. Weasley,” Dumbledore said. “Go and fetch them, would you?”

Weasley nodded and hurried off. Severus turned back to look at Harry. At the yellow fish barely able to move. Severus felt sick when he understood.

“He’s still conscious,” he said. He looked at Dumbledore and McGonagall. “The babelfish requires its host’s neural activity to survive. Since the babelfish is still mobile, Evans must have some...”

McGonagall put a hand to her mouth. “Colin Creevey...”

Dumbledore’s expression sobered. “Mr. Creevey may have been aware of his state this entire time. It is an appalling thought, but one we must consider for when the boy has been unpetrified.”

“It’s a living hell,” Severus said. “Headmaster, I will not stand idly by and allow this to continue. I will not allow my student to suffer for *months*!”

“Severus,” Dumbledore began. Just then, Weasley returned with three of Harry’s friends. Astrid Urquhart was the obvious choice. Harry had confided he thought of the belligerent girl as his best friend. Urquhart gave McGonagall a dirty look, then gasped when she saw Harry.

“No,” she said, stepping back. Severus thought she might start crying, but instead Urquhart’s face twisted with rage.

Cassius Warrington and Adrian Pucey were right behind her, both coming to a halt when they saw Harry.

“I—” Pucey said, paling. Warrington’s expression was blank, but he looked at Severus expectantly.

“I know this must be very upsetting for you,” McGonagall started.

“Shut up,” Urquhart growled, glaring at them. “This is *your* fault! People have been talking about Harry being the *heir* for months, and you let it happen! I bet the real heir got mad because there was a *mudblood* in Slytherin!”

“Miss Urquhart,” McGonagall said, taken aback, “while I appreciate your concern for your friend, I must ask you to mind your language!”

Pucey scoffed, and Urquhart looked too furious to respond.

“Why are we here, professor?” Warrington asked, still watching Severus.

“Mr. Evans left a message for us,” the headmaster said, drawing the students’ attention. “We are unable to decipher it, and thought perhaps his friends would be able to assist us.”

Urquhart visibly tried to restrain herself, then looked at Harry. Her face crumbled for a moment, but hardened in resolve.

“Of course we will help, headmaster,” Warrington said evenly, giving Pucey and Urquhart a significant look.

Severus stepped back to give them room to pass, noting that Weasley was by the door, silently observing the scene.

“In his last moments he carved this into the wall,” Dumbledore said, pointing at the odd image. Severus did not like the sound of *last moments*. His son wasn’t dead. He would be revived. Severus would make sure of that.

Urquhart bent down, frowning. “It’s an adder stone,” she said after a moment, standing back up. “We found one at the beach this summer, it looked exactly like that.”

Urquhart sniffed, then rubbed her eyes. “You’re supposed to see fairies when you look through the hole. That’s what...that’s what we told Mhairi.”

“Her little sister,” Pucey clarified.

“It’s called *Hühnergötter* in German,” Warrington said. “Chicken gods.”

“Chicken gods live in them,” Pucey agreed.

Urquhart snorted wetly, wiping her nose with a sleeve.

“What?” Pucey asked indignantly. “That’s what *babulya* says!”

“Thank you for your help,” Dumbledore said to the three students. “I believe I understand what Mr. Evans was trying to communicate.”

“Harry’s a bloody genius,” Urquhart mumbled, wiping tears from her eyes.

“Indeed,” the headmaster said. “You may all go back to the Great Hall. You too, Mr. Weasley.”

Weasley nodded. “Yes, headmaster. Come along, you three.”

Harry's friends gave him one last look, then followed Weasley out of the lavatory. The door swung shut.

"Severus, please relocate Mr. Evans to the infirmary, then proceed to the staffroom. Minerva, gather the rest of the staff. The prefects can watch over the students."

McGonagall nodded, then asked, "But what did Mr. Evans mean by that symbol?"

"All in good time," the headmaster said, walking towards the door. "I fear Mr. Evans solved this riddle from the off, and we have been remiss in our duties."

Severus glared at the headmaster's back as he left the lavatory. He had shared Harry's theories with Dumbledore, but not their origin. How much did the headmaster know?

He turned back to his son, and decided to worry about that later. He gripped Harry's stiff shoulder, then vanished the sink supporting him. McGonagall repaired the hole in the ceiling, then held the door open as he carefully levitated Harry out.

"I'm so sorry about this, Severus," McGonagall said.

"Apologies are meaningless at this point," he said, turning towards the hospital wing, not caring to wait for a response.

The doors to the infirmary opened before he got there, and Madam Pomfrey stared in horror at Harry's prone form.

"He was just in here," she said. "I just spoke with him! Severus, what is happening?"

"The headmaster has summoned us to a meeting," he said, gently lowering Harry onto a bed. Madam Pomfrey fluttered around. There was nothing she could do.

"Should we remove his wand?" she asked, touching Harry's hand lightly.

"No," he said. "He probably feels more comfortable being armed."

Severus left her to secure the infirmary, then stormed through the corridors to the staffroom. Most of his colleagues were already there, sitting around the long table in mismatched chairs, looking anxiously at each other. Dumbledore sat calmly at the head of the table, his fingers laced together. He wore bright yellow robes embroidered with various sweets, which seemed particularly inappropriate that day. Lockhart was dressed almost as ostentatiously. Severus loathed Lockhart's blithe demeanor. A student—his *son*—had just been attacked.

Filch hobbled in. "All the students are in the Great Hall, headmaster," he rasped.

"Thank you, Argus," Dumbledore said. "Please have a seat. Now," he said, "as you have all heard, another student has been petrified. Harry Evans, a fourth-year muggleborn in Slytherin."

Severus crossed his arms, ignoring the reactions of his colleagues.

“Mr. Evans left us a message, which some of his fellow Slytherins have helped us interpret,” the headmaster continued.

“You should have called me, headmaster!” Lockhart said, puffing up. Severus’ fingers twitched for his wand. “I have ample experience in decryption! Why, I recall one time, in Beirut—”

“Thank you, Gilderoy,” Dumbledore said. “If you would please allow me to finish?”

“Ah, yes, of course,” Lockhart said, beaming at them all. Severus wanted to drive a spike through his empty head.

“The message left for us was a carved image of an adder stone,” Dumbledore said. Severus closed his eyes. He hadn’t had time to think what Harry had meant by it. “The first and most obvious meaning is that Mr. Evans was attacked by a serpent of some kind. However, I believe there is more to it than that.”

“Miss Urquhart mentioned that the hole is meant to be looked through,” Severus said. “So was he petrified by making eye contact with the creature? He was looking into a mirror,” he explained to his confused colleagues.

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, and the holes in such stones are made by water. Miss Urquhart did say they found an adder stone at a beach they visited.”

“There are also legends that say the holes form portals to other realms,” Flitwick added.

“There’s the additional meaning of stones representing eggs,” McGonagall said. “As was pointed out to us. Chicken gods.”

Dumbledore sighed. “There is only one serpent I know of which hatches from a chicken egg.”

Hagrid jumped up, rattling the table. “It can’t be!”

“Spiders flee from its gaze,” Dumbledore said, looking at Hagrid knowingly.

“All the school roosters have been killed,” Hagrid said shakily. “Merlin, I should have known, professor!”

“What’s he mean?” Filch grumbled, sneering at Hagrid

Severus sighed. “It’s a basilisk.”

The room filled with gasps and cries of denial. Severus could only think that Harry had been right, and they’d let a basilisk roam the school unchecked.

His son could have died.

“A basilisk which is traversing the castle via pipes, if we have interpreted Mr. Evans’ message correctly,” Dumbledore said. “An adder stone. A hole made by water channeling

through it.” He smiled at Severus. “With one small symbol, Mr. Evans managed to convey a great deal of information. You should be proud of your student, Severus.”

Severus balled his hands into fists. “I would prefer my student to be able to speak for himself.” He sat up straight. “Headmaster, this has gone on long enough. We should have conducted a search when Colin Creevey was petrified. Now a second student has been attacked. It is unconscionable to allow this to continue! We need to search the castle for who or whatever is behind this.”

“The Board of Governors,” Sprout nervously began.

Severus rose up and slammed his hands on the table. “I don’t give a bloody *fuck* about the Board!” he snarled. “Here’s a brilliant idea, we don’t bloody well tell them we’re conducting a search! My student has just been petrified! Who’s next, Pomona? You have a house filled with muggleborns! The creature has its pick of first-years. Will they be trapped in their own bodies for months like Colin Creevey? Will the next student be *killed*?”

Severus glared around the silent room, fuming, welcoming any challenger eager to get their head torn off.

“Severus, that’s enough,” the headmaster said calmly. “Please sit down.”

Severus dropped into his chair, breathing heavily. “I *will* get to the bottom of this, with or without your cooperation, headmaster.”

“Severus,” McGonagall said gently. “Calm down. I understand what you’re—”

“Calm down? *Calm down*? You’re the deputy headmistress! If you can’t be arsed to do your job, I will!”

“You’re being a real mardy arse,” Charity Burbage said quietly at his side. Severus hadn’t even noticed her joining them. “I think the headmaster would agree with you, if you’d shut your gob and let him get a word in edgewise.”

He looked at Dumbledore, who was placidly waiting for his strop to end. The silence stretched.

“I agree things cannot continue as they have been,” Dumbledore said at last. “I would like to make it clear that the following must not leave this room. If anyone would like to remain ignorant, you are welcome to leave.”

No one moved. Filch was practically foaming at the mouth. He’d been wanting to tear the castle apart since Mrs. Norris’ petrification.

“The dormitories will be searched by the heads of house,” Dumbledore said. “Poppy, Argus, we three shall be checking the students for any dark artifacts in their immediate possession, and any influence they may be under. Imperius, memory charms, potions. Discount nothing.”

Madam Pomfrey’s lips thinned, and she nodded.

Dumbledore went around the room assigning tasks. The staff would be checking their respective domains. Hooch the quidditch equipment, Pince the library, Hagrid the grounds, and so on. Dumbledore was going to address the students, and set up protection in the Great Hall.

Charity Burbage brought up a point no one had considered.

“Why do we even have pipes in the castle?” she asked. “Seems pointless. Why don’t we block them off so it can’t move around anymore? Or better yet, flood the pipes and flush the damn thing out. Drown it, if we’re lucky.”

“We could destroy the pipes,” Flitwick suggested, grinning in a way that recalled his goblin heritage. “A few well placed explosions should pin the beast down.”

Hagrid cleared his throat. “A rooster’s crow is fatal to basilisks. I could go to Hogsmeade and buy a few.”

Charity nodded eagerly. “Exactly! A pincer attack. Blast it with roosters, blow it up, then drown the bastard.”

Dumbledore smiled wanly. “We will, of course, need to deal with the basilisk. Let us first identify how it is being controlled. Now, let us get to work.”

Severus stood next to the headmaster as he addressed the students.

“My dear students,” Dumbledore said. “In order to ensure your safety, you will remain sequestered in the Great Hall while your professors conduct a thorough search of the castle. Madam Pomfrey will be administering a wellness check under my supervision. Professors Babbling and Vector are currently constructing additional security around the Great Hall.”

Dumbledore lowered his head, looking around the hall. “I must ask that any students who have information about the attacks to please come forward at this time. Two of your fellow students have been severely injured. Anything you have to say will be held in confidence. It is my belief that no student is capable of having committed the attacks, and vanishingly few adult witches or wizards possess dark magicks equal to the task. As such, I don’t believe any student is at fault. I implore anyone with any information they feel may be relevant to approach me directly.”

The Great Hall was silent. Severus looked at his Slytherins. Harry’s friends were clustered together with grim expressions. Charity Lament looked on the verge of a rampage, and he saw a few of the second and first-years had moved away from Draco Malfoy. The boy must have made another idiotic comment.

He looked at Cedric Diggory, who had a complicated expression. Guilt, sadness, anger. Severus thought the boy deserved it. He hadn't be blind to Diggory distancing himself from Harry while rumors about his son flew around the castle. His *petrified* son. He took some vindictive pleasure in knowing how very wrong so many of the students had been.

Some students were crying. A small Ravenclaw girl for whatever reason. Perhaps she was scared? The youngest Weasley girl was openly sobbing into her prefect brother's robes. Monty Potter also looked stricken with grief. Severus pursed his lips, wondering what his son had been up to. Neville Longbottom was shaking like a leaf. Severus didn't bother unpacking *that* mess.

Severus left the Great Hall alongside his fellow heads of house, leaving it to Dumbledore to sort through the students. He knew it would take hours, perhaps days, to turn over the castle. Though Dumbledore hadn't stated it explicitly, that they were starting with the dormitories and scanning the students implied he believed a student was being possessed, either by a spirit or wraith, like with Quirrell, or by an object.

He entered the dungeons, not looking forward to going through his students' belongings. His colleagues were right in that it was violative of their privacy, and Severus would have loathed it being done to him. He didn't even want to contemplate what he would find, what sort of things the students were hiding. He might have to do some selective obliviation when the day was over.

That evening, they reconvened in the headmaster's office. The students were being made to sleep in the Great Hall, under supervision. They couldn't keep the students confined for much longer. It would end in anarchy. They needed to eliminate the basilisk soon, or send the students home early. Those who had homes to go to, at least.

Severus stood to the side of the room, while McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout sat across from the headmaster.

"No student is currently being possessed," the headmaster said. "Though a few are under considerable mental distress. Has anything been discovered?"

Severus shook his head. "No artifacts capable of controlling a basilisk." Going through Harry's things had been the hardest. He'd seen presents wrapped up in his trunk. One with his own name on it.

Flitwick and Sprout also denied finding anything.

"Albus," McGonagall said. "I have found something. Among Ginny Weasley's belongings."

Severus' eyebrows rose. That was unexpected. Dumbledore, strangely, wasn't surprised. Not until McGonagall placed a thin black diary on his desk.

Severus took an inadvertent step back.

“What on earth *is* that?” he asked, staring at the object.

“Dark magic,” Flitwick hissed. “*Black* magic.”

Sprout was scooting her chair away. “Headmaster...”

The headmaster picked the diary up, and opened it to the first page. He stared at it for a long time, then shut the diary again. He closed his eyes, looking older than Severus had ever seen him.

“Minerva,” Dumbledore said wearily. “Please fetch Miss Weasley. Severus, contact her parents at the Burrow. We have some things to discuss.”

Stupid Little Girls

Chapter Summary

December 1992

The Great Hall was lit by the dim glow of floating candles and the silvery light of restless ghosts drifting in and out. The ceiling was opaque black, the blizzard still raging outside. It was the darkest part of the night, and the hush was punctuated by soft snores, the rustle of shifting bodies, and the occasional snuffle of a crying child.

Percy paced between the sleeping students, exhausted yet unable to rest. His eyes strayed towards Ginny again, who had cried herself to sleep. She hadn't been the only one, but she was his sister and his failure to prevent the third petrification was more poignant in the face of her distress.

If he had got to the hospital wing earlier. If he had been faster in leaving. If he had been more alert, more observant. But he had been dizzy, nauseated, a headache forming as it always did after his injection. The same thing that had happened every day for years. And he had been too late to save him.

Percy turned to continue his circuit. The doors opened, drawing his attention. It was Professor McGonagall, slinking in as soundlessly as a cat. She spotted him and hurried forward.

"Mr. Weasley," she said in a low tone, her expression somber. "The headmaster has requested your sister's presence."

His back stiffened. His first instinct was to ask why, why Ginny, why his little sister, what could she possibly have to do with anything? She had just got to sleep, she was tired, she had been doing poorly lately. But the pieces started to fit together. What Percy has ascribed to first-year jitters was artlessly recontextualized. How pale Ginny was. Her persistent exhaustion. Her strange silences. Her reclusiveness. She hadn't been herself for months.

The insight chilled him to the bone.

"I will wake her, professor," Percy said. "May I accompany her?"

McGonagall gave him a pitying look. "Of course you may."

Severus disliked summoning his patronus, but the Weasleys were needed and his initial attempt to contact them via floo had gone unacknowledged.

He paced back and forth in his office, waiting for a response. Finally, his fire flared up and the face of a careworn woman appeared.

“Professor Snape?” Molly Weasley said. “I’m so sorry we missed the floo, Arthur’s had a long night. Has something happened at the school?”

“I apologize for contacting you at such a late hour,” Severus said. “Your presence is required at Hogwarts.”

She sighed. “What have the twins done this time? Can it wait until morning?”

Why couldn’t McGonagall have done this part?

“This is actually in regards to your daughter. As you may be aware, there have been several petrification incidents this year. Another student was petrified this past day. We have discovered an item in your daughter’s possession which may be linked to it.”

Molly stared blankly out of the fire. “I’ll get Arthur. Can we come through this grate?”

“Certainly,” Severus said, and Molly’s head vanished. A few minutes later, she and Arthur Weasley stepped into his office. Both had clearly been asleep, having hastily thrown robes over their pajamas.

“Please follow me to the headmaster’s office,” he said, opening his office door.

“Is Ginny alright?” Molly asked anxiously.

“To the best of my knowledge,” Severus said, walking steadily so as to not outpace the Weasleys. “She should be in the headmaster’s office with Professor McGonagall. It would be best to save your questions until we arrive. I am also curious how this situation came to be about.”

The Weasleys exchanged looks. “Pardon me, Professor Snape,” Arthur said. “But why did you contact us and not Professor McGonagall?”

Severus crossed his arms, controlling his reaction. Questions had been running through his mind since McGonagall had revealed that unsettling diary. First and foremost, how had the girl got hold of it? It wouldn’t help to lose his temper.

“It was one of my students who was petrified,” he said.

They continued their walk to the headmaster’s office in silence.

Percy stood to the side and several paces back, as was proper for a prefect escorting a student to a professor for reprimand. He kept his gaze steadily ahead, but Ginny was in his peripheral vision, sitting rigidly in a chair too large for her. She was so small, so thin. How had he not noticed that? The distance between them felt strained with tension. Was he here in his capacity as a prefect? Or as a brother? The lack of direction preyed on his already frayed nerves. Ginny needed him.

Professor McGonagall stood at the headmaster's side, as implacable as a statue, her expression unreadable. The headmaster watched them all with impressive equanimity, which Percy attributed to years of holding such an elevated position. He wished he could face such a challenging situation with equal serenity. None of the books he read had prepared him for *your little sister is being accused of a series of near fatal assaults on her fellow students.*

"Ah," the headmaster said, smiling. "It seems your parents have arrived, Miss Weasley."

Fawkes, the headmaster's phoenix, raised his head slightly and sang a few mournful notes.

Moments later the door to the office swung open on noiseless hinges, and Professor Snape strode into the room, his presence forbidding. Percy's parents followed close behind, in faded robes over old dressing gowns, provincial in the face of the office's grandeur.

"Arthur, Molly, it's a pleasure to see you both," the headmaster said, standing to greet them. "I am sorry we are not meeting under more pleasant circumstances."

He took their hands, shaking them fondly.

"It's lovely to see you too, Professor Dumbledore," his mother said. "And you as well, Professor McGonagall."

"Something's happened to Ginny?" his father asked, looking at his sister.

"I suppose I must get to it, then," the headmaster said, reclaiming his seat. Two more chairs appeared for his parents, and they sat to either side of Ginny. "I'm afraid an object has been found in your daughter's possession, an object which we believe is responsible for the string of recent petrifications."

The headmaster lifted a thin black book from his desk, holding it up for examination. There was something...off about it. Percy couldn't quite put his finger on it. The book itself was unassuming. He had seen Ginny writing in it before. It was her diary, and she always hid it away when someone got too close.

Percy's eyes widened when the headmaster's words registered. That book, the diary, was responsible for the petrifications? How?

"I'm not sure I understand," his mother said, glancing at Ginny.

"This diary is a dark artifact," the headmaster explained. "Though by what magic it acts, I cannot say. Perhaps Ginny can enlighten us?"

Ginny twitched, then started crying again. Their mother pulled Ginny into her arms.

“There, there, love,” their mother said. “It’s alright. I’m sure this will all be sorted soon.”

Professor Snape made an inarticulate noise, but at a look from Professor McGonagall remained silent. Percy’s father noticed, though, and frowned.

“What exactly has happened to the petrified students?” his father asked.

The headmaster’s expression darkened. “We believe a basilisk is present in the castle. One of Severus’ students, a muggleborn named Harry Evans, indicated as such in a final act before he was attacked by the creature. Madam Pomfrey has assured me the students, and Mr. Filch’s cat, will be restored to full health once we are able to procure mature mandrakes for a restorative draught. However,” the headmaster said, looking over his half-moon glasses, “recent evidence suggests the victims are conscious in their petrified state. I must impress upon you all the severity of this situation. We need to know how exactly it came about so we may rid Hogwarts of this threat.”

It took some more coaxing from their parents, but eventually the story came out.

Ginny finding the diary among her school books. Writing in it. The astonishment of it writing back. Of making a new friend, a friend that understood, someone to help her navigate all the new experiences she was having. Tom. Waking up covered in feathers, covered in paint, covered in blood, losing time, gaps in her memory, the fear, confusion, shame, guilt, asking Tom for help, not knowing what to do, lost, alone, scared.

Percy was overcome with guilt. Ginny’s first months at Hogwarts, what should have been a happy and wonderful time, had been tainted by dark magic lurking in an old diary. He felt disgust for himself, at how he had not seen what was so obvious in retrospect. How he had failed his sister as a brother, had failed Hogwarts as a prefect. He had been there the whole time, and yet he had not done enough. Ginny had been suffering on her own. She hadn’t been able to rely on him. Her own brother.

He knew what he had to do.

Severus could control his emotions, when he wanted to. At the moment, he wanted to rage at a stupid little girl whose arrogance and disregard for those around her had put his son’s life at risk.

He forced himself to imagine Harry in her position, but that tactic failed. Harry would never have been so stupid as to write in a diary that *wrote back*. He would have reached out to someone as soon as he realized something was wrong. He wouldn’t have stood for a cat, then a student, then *another* student being attacked without speaking up. Yet Ginny Weasley had kept her silence until the facts were all but torn out of her, until she was confronted with undeniable proof of her involvement.

He was appalled by the coddling. The girl had jeopardized the lives of every person in Hogwarts with her behavior. Expulsion was the least of what should happen to her.

His son could be dead, and she had the nerve to cry as if she were the real victim.

Severus realized, and refused to acknowledge, that he was being irrational. Whatever the diary was had likely leached off the girl's magic and contributed to her reluctance to act. There was something seductive about it, but the diary's presence had faded, likely owing to having no current victim to latch onto. And the girl was, ultimately, a victim of magic too powerful for her to contend with. She was only eleven.

Someone had given the girl the diary, slipped it into her schoolbooks. Severus was poised to ask for more information when someone cleared their throat.

It was Percy Weasley, stepping forward with a resolute expression.

"Headmaster," Weasley said solemnly. "I was aware Ginny had a diary, and that her demeanor these past few months was at odds with her normal attitude. I have failed in my duties as a prefect. I would like to tender my resignation."

In the ensuing silence, Weasley began removing his prefect badge.

Severus stared at the boy, absolutely mystified by his behavior.

"Mr. Weasley," Professor McGonagall said, breaking the awkward silence. "What on earth are you talking about?"

The girl burst into tears again, burying her face in her mother's robes.

"Professor McGonagall," Weasley said, still struggling with his badge, "it is my responsibility to ensure the safety of my fellow students. I also failed to intervene in Evans' petrification. I had just seen him in the hospital wing, I should have been able—"

"You're being ridiculous," McGonagall said over the girl's sobbing. "We could hardly expect a student to recognize the danger of this...this diary. You're meant to help students find their classes and keep magic out of the corridors, not initiate investigations! You're not an auror, you're a student! Oh, for goodness' sake, Mr. Weasley, stop trying to remove your badge!"

Weasley didn't seem to hear her, and swayed a little. His father caught his arm.

"When's the last time you've eaten?" Arthur asked.

"It's been a few hours," Weasley admitted.

His father looked unhappy at that. "You need to eat, Percy. No one is blaming you for what happened. Nor Ginny for that matter." His expression hardened. "In fact, I have a good idea who's behind this."

The headmaster perked up. "Do you?"

Arthur pressed his lips together, looking at his crying daughter. "We can discuss it later. I think we ought to take Ginny home, unless you have any more questions for her?"

"We're taking all of our children home!" Molly said, cradling her daughter. "A basilisk! In Hogwarts! For months! We're taking the children with us to visit Bill, Arthur."

"Yes, dear," Arthur said. "I think some time away from Hogwarts is what Ginny needs."

"And what about the students who have been petrified?" Severus asked. "What reprieve do they get?"

Molly looked at them imploringly. "We could reach out to their parents, explain the situation. What we know of it."

"Colin Creevey's parents are muggles with no knowledge of the magical world," Severus said. "And Mr. Evans has no family. He's an orphan."

This made the girl cry harder, and McGonagall shot him a disapproving look.

"All in good time, Severus," the headmaster said, a meaningless sentiment if he ever heard one.

"I should stay at Hogwarts," Weasley said out of nowhere. "The professors need our support at a time like this."

"Oh, no," Molly said fiercely. "You're coming home with us! Tonight!"

Severus stood back and watched as the Weasleys were rounded up and shuffled out of the room along with McGonagall. Arthur Weasley lingered, waving off his wife's imprecations.

Once the door shut again, the headmaster spoke. "What is it you have to tell me, Arthur?"

"It was Malfoy," Arthur said. "We had a bit of a...disagreement...in Flourish and Blotts."

"Yes, I heard the tale from Hagrid," Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling.

"Ginny's books were knocked to the ground," Arthur said. "Lucius Malfoy picked them up. He must have put that," he said, gesturing to the diary, "in with them."

Dumbledore nodded. "And he has been rather outspoken against the Muggle Protection Act."

Severus would not have described Arthur Weasley as an intimidating man. He was thin, shabbily dressed, near-sighted, and balding. However, he now recognized a kindred spirit in the face of the man's fury at his daughter being targeted. While his own fatherhood was rather new, Severus had gradually realized how thoroughly, irrevocably invested he was in Harry's welfare. It had slammed into him with all the force of a rogue bludger when he realized who the basilisk's latest victim had been.

"But how do we prove it?" Arthur said, frustrated.

“I’m sure we will be hearing from Lucius Malfoy very soon,” Dumbledore said. “For now, Arthur, you should be with your family. This is a trying time for all of us.”

“More so for some than others,” Severus muttered.

Arthur excused himself, still mumbling about Lucius Malfoy. If Lucius Malfoy was the catalyst for the basilisk being released, the possession of Ginny Weasley, the attacks on cats and muggleborns...it put Severus in a delicate position. The Dark Lord was out there, somewhere. Watching, waiting, who knew what a wraith did. Taking a vocal stance against Lucius Malfoy would not work out in his favor, should the Dark Lord regain power. But his son was a victim. His son was lying insensate in the hospital wing, a prisoner in his own body.

The headmaster sighed. “With this artifact secured, I doubt the basilisk will be active.”

Severus turned to him. “Will the students be leaving as scheduled?”

Dumbledore nodded. “By the time we contact their families and get responses, the train will have already left. It can wait for a day.”

“I imagine we will eliminate the basilisk?”

“We will,” the headmaster agreed. “To think, the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets would be in a girls’ lavatory. The same lavatory where Miss Warren was killed.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “By the basilisk?”

“I believe so. I suspected Tom was the one to open the Chamber the last time, fifty years ago. But he contrived to get Hagrid expelled in lieu of Hogwarts being shut down.”

“Tom?”

The headmaster sighed. “Tom Riddle. The true name of Lord Voldemort.”

Severus stared at him. “Tom Riddle.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore said. “The last of Salazar Slytherin’s descendents.”

“Is named Tom Riddle,” Severus said.

“Tom Marvolo Riddle, to be specific. A rather muggle name, isn’t it?” Dumbledore said. “Presumably why he was so eager to be rid of it.”

Severus rubbed his forehead. So the Dark Lord’s birth name had been Tom *Marvolo* Riddle. He sounded like the ringmaster of a circus, which was a rather apt description of what the Death Eaters had become at the end.

He decided not to dwell on it. He folded his arms, then spotted Fawkes smoldering on his gilt perch.

“Perhaps we should try phoenix tears to heal the petrification,” Severus said, eyeing Fawkes.

“Phoenix tears are not a panacea,” Dumbledore said. “I have asked Fawkes for his assistance in this matter, to no avail.”

Fawkes buried his magnificently plumed head under a wing.

Severus scowled at the bird. “How convenient.”

Severus watched the students assemble with clear eyes. He hadn’t slept, but he was an expert potioneer and thus drugged to the gills on his homebrew stimulant. He’d been up all night, along with the other heads of house, blocking all plumbing in the dormitories and charming the fixtures to operate without running water. The students had been let out of the Great Hall in the morning to return to their basilisk-proof dormitories before one or all of them snapped. Meals had been served in the common rooms. The corridors were empty.

Now they had returned to the Great Hall for a subdued end-of-term feast, put together by the house-elves not currently spelunking through the castle’s pipes on a quest to find the Chamber of Secrets. The headmaster was reasonably confident he could imitate parseltongue, or compel a living snake to open the entrance in the second-floor girls’ lavatory. However, it had been deduced that there was more than one access point, otherwise how would the basilisk have such free navigation? And why were there so many basilisk-sized pipes in Hogwarts?

If it had been Salazar Slytherin setting up paths for his basilisk, how had this gone unnoticed by the other founders? It was a puzzle they would likely never solve and, as the pipes were entirely superfluous, one which would soon be eradicated.

“Welcome,” Dumbledore said as the students settled at their tables. “End-of-term is a time to celebrate, both for students freed from the obligation of their school work, and for professors no longer burdened by the arduous task of correcting that work. Alas, this term ends on a bittersweet note. Two of your fellow students currently lie in the infirmary, survivors of an attack by a creature born of cruelty and dark magic.”

Severus was fairly certain basilisks were born of someone sticking a toad on a chicken egg, but the headmaster did enjoy his hyperbole.

“Some families have requested their children return home early in light of the recent attack. However,” Dumbledore said with a smile, “it is my pleasure to inform you the cause of the petrifications has been identified. A dark artifact entered the castle and has now been secured. The creature the artifact awakened will be euthanized, and Hogwarts will be safe once more.”

“What’s the monster?” Astrid Urquhart called out.

“Excellent question, Miss Urquhart. It was in fact your friend Mr. Evans who discovered the nature of the beast, as it were. It is a basilisk.”

Whispering started up immediately. There wasn't much one could do to assure children a basilisk wasn't an immediate threat. The truth of the matter was Hogwarts *wasn't* safe, not yet. They had theorized that, without a host, the diary could not manipulate the basilisk. As for the basilisk's current whereabouts, they had no idea.

Dumbledore surveyed their agitated students, letting the new information sink in. “I would like to emphasize that no student was behind this. We are still investigating how this artifact entered the castle, and will be securing Hogwarts against similar intrusions in the future.”

Astrid Urquhart stood up, bracing herself on the table for support. She looked like she hadn't slept either. “I have something to say,” she announced.

Dumbledore looked genuinely interested. “Please feel free to share your thoughts, Miss Urquhart.”

Urquhart took a deep breath. “Fuck all of you!”

“Miss Urquhart!” McGonagall said, half rising from her seat. “Severus, control your student!”

“I find myself of a mind with Miss Urquhart,” he said quietly, smiling faintly at his student.

“No, fuck you too!” Urquhart shouted. “Harry could have died! You let them treat him like shit! He could have *died*!”

She sat back down and crossed her arms, glaring at the head table.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “While I appreciate the sentiment, I will ask students to refrain from vulgarities.” He paused, then added, “I *am* disappointed in the treatment of certain students in the wake of the attacks, and the indelicate behavior of others. In times of adversity, I have often found strength in unity. Let this be a lesson to all of us. On that note, let the feast begin!”

Bedside Manner

Chapter Summary

December 1992

“She needs to be punished, Severus.”

“Ginny Weasley? I concur.”

McGonagall gave him a stern look. “I am speaking of Miss Astrid Urquhart. I understand the petrification of Evans hasn’t been easy on his housemates, but we cannot tolerate students acting disrespectfully. It sets a bad precedent. I *know* you agree with this. Merlin knows how many points you’ve taken for students not calling you *sir*!”

Severus mulled it over. He did agree with McGonagall, in general, but felt the situation warranted Urquhart’s outburst.

“If you wish to owl her parents about her behavior, by all means,” he said, smirking at McGonagall’s expression. She had dug her own grave with Urquhart, she could fill it at her leisure.

“While this is fascinating,” Dumbledore said, smiling at them from behind his desk, “we have more pressing matters to discuss than Miss Urquhart’s colorful language. How was the students’ departure?”

Severus looked away from McGonagall. “All of the students were safely escorted onto the train. There are a few left in the castle. Creevey and Evans, obviously.”

McGonagall readjusted her robes. “Potter is also remaining, given the house-elf targeting him. One other student has stayed as well, a first-year Ravenclaw, Luna Lovegood. Her father is currently somewhere in the Arctic Circle and unreachable.”

“Xenophilius was always an adventurous one,” Dumbledore said fondly.

“There was a slight incident in the hospital wing earlier,” McGonagall said, glancing at Severus. “Several of Mr. Evans’ friends tried to sneak in with a frog. One of them is evidently in the Frog Choir and was upset that their performance was canceled and, had it not been, that Evans would have missed it.”

“Excellent, excellent,” Dumbledore said. “Now, Severus, I believe there is something you wish to discuss with Minerva and I?”

“Yes,” he said, frowning at the chair that had been conjured for him. “The matter of Ginevra Weasley’s punishment.”

Dumbledore watched him with mild interest, while McGonagall looked terribly offended.

“Punishment?” she said. “She’s been possessed by You-Know-Who!”

“Intermittent possession,” Severus said, crossing his arms. “She had full use of all of her faculties the majority of the time, and was very much aware that something was happening to her.”

“I agree that she showed poor judgment,” McGonagall said, “But she is an eleven-year-old girl, Severus. Older witches than her have been fooled by You-Know-Who!”

Severus huffed. “Poor judgment? Poor judgment is choosing Divination over Arithmancy. What Weasley demonstrated is a complete and utter lack of any judgment whatsoever. It was a failure to judge, in any capacity, and we have two petrified students due to her lack of diligence.”

“She was *possessed*,” McGonagall said acidly. “You cannot expect a child her age to act rationally in a situation like that. We don’t even know the full extent of the impact the cursed diary has had on her!”

Severus shook his head. “Shall we enumerate the ways in which Miss Weasley erred in judgment? Let’s ignore her writing in a sentient diary for months, fully knowing as a child raised in the magical world that such an object was abnormal. What was it her father said? *Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can’t see where it keeps its brain*? A lesson the girl has been taught from infancy!”

Dumbledore tapped his desk. “Severus, you cannot fault the girl for being manipulated by Voldemort, or have you forgotten your own history?”

Severus sneered. “I’ve paid for my own *poor judgment*,” he said. “Which is entirely irrelevant to the current predicament. Two students are in the infirmary. The girl sicced a basilisk on them, and we have yet to ascertain its location. Colin Creevey survived by pure luck, and Harry Evans because he possesses more wit than any other student in this school!”

“Voldemort, or an echo of him, controlled the basilisk,” Dumbledore corrected. “Not Ginny Weasley. Her body was little more than a puppet.”

“That does not obviate her choice to write in that thing,” Severus said. “A choice she continued to make for months, without telling anyone of the nature of the diary. For what reason? What prevented her from reaching out to any of the *four* brothers she shares a house with?”

McGonagall shook her head. “She is *eleven*, Severus! Why is it so difficult to accept that a child that age isn’t a perfect logical machine?”

“She was invited to divulge any information she had regarding the attacks on multiple occasions,” he said. “She chose not to. Would a dead child change your mind, Minerva? Had we found Colin Creevey’s corpse instead, would you still be making excuses?”

McGonagall’s lips thinned. “The blame would still lie with the diary, and I dare say whoever gave it to Ginny! But that person is beyond your reach. You are merely looking for someone to punish, and Ginny Weasley happens to be the most convenient target.”

“So your solution is to do nothing?” he asked, disbelieving.

“I think we could have a discussion about what a reasonable punishment would look like,” she said. “*If* we determine punishment is appropriate at all in this situation.”

Severus scoffed. “You, the woman who thought it was appropriate for an eleven-year-old to play seeker, a high-pressure role in which the boy has nearly died *twice*, and would have without my intervention, believe an eleven-year-old has no culpability whatsoever in this situation?”

“This is an *entirely* different situation,” McGonagall said, aghast. “You cannot compare playing quidditch with being possessed by You-Know-Who!”

“I think that is enough for now,” Dumbledore said, startling them. “Cooler heads will prevail. We needn’t decide what to do with Ginny Weasley at this time. I do, however, think expulsion is off the table. Suspension is a possibility, and may be necessary if she is not yet recovered from her ordeal.”

Dumbledore met Severus’ eyes. “Living with the consequences of your actions is often punishment enough, don’t you agree?”

Severus glared at him. “Tell that to the dead.”

“Just as I expected,” Lockhart declared, smiling in self-satisfaction. “A basilisk. I knew from the very beginning what stalked these halls. It’s quite fortunate I’m here, I’ve dealt with basilisks before. Ran into a pit of them, in Rhodes of all places!”

Severus pressed his palms into his eyes in an effort to stop himself from throttling Lockhart. The man was a trial to tolerate in the best of times, and Severus had once allied himself with the likes of Fenrir Greyback. Even thinking the man’s name was a powerful reminder of the stench of carrion. He couldn’t define what scent Lockhart doused himself in, other than *overwhelming*.

“Would you believe I encountered a siren the last time I was on the island? Charming woman, though a bit, well, *forward*, if you get my meaning.”

“As always, the tales of your voyages are enthralling,” Dumbledore said. “Thank you, Gilderoy, but I’m afraid we must turn to the task at hand.”

“Yes, of course, headmaster,” Lockhart said. “No one is more troubled than I am over recent events. Muggleborns and squibs have a special place in my heart, truly unique. You see, my two older sisters are squibs, and my mother is a muggleborn!”

“Bully for you,” Charity Burbage muttered. She was busy forming a precarious stack of biscuits. Severus had no idea where she had got them from as no one else had any. Probably some Hufflepuffian machinations involving house-elves.

“I imagine the families of the petrified students are rather more affected, Gilderoy,” McGonagall said drily.

“Ah, yes, well,” Lockhart said, still smiling. “At least the Evans boy hasn’t got one. There is some comfort in that!”

There was a *snap*, and the section of table in front of Severus developed a jagged crack.

“Lockhart,” he said menacingly. “If you do not cease your imbecilic prattling, I will be forced to take measures to ensure the next voyage you take will be of a more permanent kind.”

“I—” Lockhart spluttered.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said warningly. “If we could please focus on the basilisk dwelling within our walls. Pomona, how is progress on the pipes?”

Severus took out his wand and repaired the damage he had inadvertently caused to the table. It was slightly embarrassing to have a magical outburst as an adult, even a minor one. He couldn’t remember the last time he had slept. Sleeping felt like doing nothing, and he needed to be doing something to help his son.

Sprout rambled about the fleet of house-elves in the pipes, some promising leads, finding pieces of shed skin and marks of the basilisk’s passage. It was a bit cruel ordering the house-elves to search for such a dangerous creature, but their small stature and ability to apparate within Hogwarts made them ideal investigators. It also meant none of the staff had to crawl around the pipes.

Out of long habit, Severus emptied his mind, less of a state of calm than of absence. When Sprout finished relaying the house-elf hijinks, he was able to speak in a moderate tone.

“Has there been any success in acquiring mature mandrakes?” he asked her.

Sprout sadly shook her head. “I’ve reached out to other herbologists, but the blight this past season has heavily impacted the few nurseries in the world. Mandrake simply isn’t being sold on the open market.”

“Then perhaps we should explore other means of acquisition,” he said, looking towards Hagrid. The man had got a cerberus and a dragon egg, how hard could a mandrake be?

Hagrid scratched his nose. “I could ask a few lads down in Knockturn, I suppose. Pick up a few roosters while I’m at it.”

Severus leaned back. Working at Hogwarts wasn’t exactly conducive to black market ingredient sourcing. But he did have those vials of unicorn blood...

“I contacted St. Mungo’s well over a month ago,” Madam Pomfrey said brusquely. “They have no stock of mandrake nor the draught. I’ve owled some healers I know, but it will take some time to hear back.”

“Very well,” Dumbledore said. “We shall continue blocking pipes which directly open into the castle. I will be speaking with the merchieftainess. The pipes must drain somewhere, and it would behoove us to warn the denizens of the Black Lake lest we exile a basilisk to their waters. The sooner we have the pipes mapped, the sooner we can shore up these points of egress.”

They continued their discussion of the basilisk affair, and some end-of-term academic matters of comparatively lesser importance. School rankings were meaningless with an existential threat hunting them down.

“Minerva, Filius, please tarry a moment,” Dumbledore said when they were dismissed. “We need to put some rules in place for the students staying over the holiday. Filius, I believe Miss Lovegood is a frequent sleepwalker?”

Severus stood up, feeling very distant from things. He needed to go to the dungeons, find pipes, seal pipes, check on Harry, confirm there was no change in his condition, research alternatives to the Mandrake Restorative Draught, question Dumbledore on why he could find twelve uses for dragon blood but a sum total of zero for phoenix tears despite the readily available phoenix. He understood phoenix tears could heal any injury, though it seemed *injury* was very narrowly defined and did not encompass certain magical conditions. Petrification was not a physical wound.

He passed by the corridor that led the hospital wing, resisting the urge to go stare helplessly at his son. He needed his lab. Developing new potions took years of dedicated effort, but Severus wasn’t a potions master for nothing. He had invented one potion to help his son. He could invent another.

It was the middle of the night when Severus allowed himself to visit Harry. Normally he welcomed an empty castle, but Harry’s absence made the silence more pronounced. Harry could have been sneaking out of his dormitory to ride around on that ridiculous board of his, trying to do a nollie or backside wallride or Casper flip or some other ludicrously named trick.

He sat beside Harry's bed. He was still petrified, still had his wand gripped in his hand, still had that knowing smile. Frankie was a golden shadow in the air, caught in the slowed movements of Harry's mind. What was he thinking? Could he think at all? How did the world appear to him in his petrified state?

Severus was edging closer to committing mandrake infanticide. It would be easier to modify the current formula than to develop an alternative potion from scratch. He doubted Sprout would appreciate her mandrakes being cut down in their youth, but Harry's life was much, much more important than some squalling plant. He didn't care how long Sprout had spent knitting the mandrakes' winter wear.

A small noise caught his attention. Severus' skin crawled, as it always did in close proximity to the invisibility cloak. He didn't have to cast any revealing charms to know Potter was nearby. It had infuriated James Potter how easily Severus could find him and his cronies skulking around the school at night. They had abruptly got more proficient in evading capture in sixth year, which had similarly infuriated Severus at the time. He never did work out what they had done.

"What are you doing out of bed at this hour, Potter?" he asked, lacking the usual venom when speaking to the boy. Harry wouldn't have liked it, and Severus was drained.

"Sorry, professor," Potter said, pulling off the cloak and stuffing it away in his robes. "I just...Madam Pomfrey said no visitors."

"So you thought you'd sneak out after hours while there's a feral basilisk on the prowl?"

Potter shifted nervously. "I wanted to make sure Harry was okay."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "I can assure you, he isn't." Sighing, he said, "You really are just like your father. Total disregard for the rules, sneaking about the castle under that damnable cloak."

Potter's eyes widened. The color was a painful reminder. He wanted to look away.

"You knew my dad?"

Severus sighed again. If Harry was able to hear them, he wouldn't forgive him for brushing Potter off. "Unfortunately. We were in the same year. From the beginning we didn't get along."

There was a pathetic, desperate look on Potter's face. Of course Petunia wouldn't tell the boy a thing about his parents, about James Potter and his skulk. Well, there were plenty of others Potter could get stories from. Severus had never had a kind word to say about any of them. Puerile, the lot.

"Is that why..."

Severus shut his eyes in annoyance when Potter failed to complete his thought. "Why what?"

"Why you hate me?"

Severus looked at Monty Potter. At the twelve-year-old boy who had been forced to sleep in a cupboard, who had been raised completely ignorant of his heritage, who had been dubbed the Boy-Who-Lived and was oblivious to what that moniker meant to their world. Whose only remaining connection to his father was an ancient artifact from a story he had never heard.

Severus could honestly say he had only agreed to Dumbledore's conditions in honor of Lily. He had never considered what Lily would have thought about the situation, about him bargaining with Voldemort for her life over her son's. One of her sons. Sons she had willingly given her life to protect.

"I do not hate you," he said, wondering why the boy would care at all. "You have stepped into a world you know nothing about, and from what I have seen you have made little to no effort in familiarizing yourself with it. It is...frustrating. But, as someone once put it to me, you never had the opportunity to know your father. It is senseless to conflate you two."

It was preposterous he was having a civil conversation with Fleamont *James* Potter in the middle of the night in the infirmary next to his petrified son. What had his life come to?

Potter's brow furrowed. "Is that why you asked me all those questions on the first day? I read all of my school books, I don't remember them having anything about the Draught of Death."

"Draught of Living Death," he corrected. "And no, first year texts wouldn't. It was, perhaps, unfair to ask such a question." Severus had seen the locked cupboard. The books hidden under the floorboard.

Potter snorted, then covered his mouth, embarrassed.

They sat in silence for a while. Severus was contemplating taking Potter back to Gryffindor Tower—letting him run around on his own was out of the question—when Potter spoke again.

"He's going to be okay, right?" Potter asked. "You'll make that restorative potion for him?"

"I will," Severus said.

Potter shifted around, and Severus scowled in annoyance.

"Did you have something else to ask, Potter?"

"No, not ask," Potter said. "I've told the headmaster about the house-elf that keeps showing up. But I saw something this summer. Ron said Ginny got the diary from Lucius Malfoy."

Severus didn't know why he was surprised the Weasleys hadn't been able to keep their mouths shut. Arthur Weasley had probably ranted his way out of the castle. Severus had the sudden insight that Arthur Weasley was likely as obnoxious in his attitude towards Lucius Malfoy as Severus was towards James Potter.

James Potter, who had stood between the Dark Lord and his family, who had died to give Lily a chance to flee with their son. What had Severus done? Begged more powerful men to help him.

Pathetic.

“What did you see?” he asked.

“I saw the Malfoys in Borgin and Burkes,” Potter said. “It sounded like he was trying to sell something.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “And what was the Boy Who Lived doing in Knockturn Alley?”

Potter grimaced, then glanced at Harry. “It was an accident. Harry found me. He gave me his cloak so no one would notice me.”

His son traipsing around Knockturn Alley didn’t improve his mood, though he knew Harry could take care of himself. At least it was during the daytime.

“Thank you for telling me,” Severus said.

Potter gave him a hesitant smile.

He had to look away. Monty also had Lily’s smile.

“I’ve had an idea,” Sprout said. She was carrying a box filled with fuzzy earmuffs for them to wear.

Hagrid had a cage of roosters. Burbage had an axe. Flitwick looked like he wished he had an axe. McGonagall was also looking at the axe. The other staff members were in the infirmary, along with the two petrified and two unpetrified students staying over the holiday, barricaded in.

“Have you?” Severus asked. “A source for mature mandrakes?”

“Not quite,” Sprout said. “There are ways to encourage a plant’s growth, though sometimes there is an adverse effect, such as—”

“Spare me the herbology lesson,” he said.

Sprout gave him a disapproving frown. “We might be able to speed up the maturation process using an ageing potion. It would have to be adjusted for their physiology, of course.”

“Of course,” he said, his mind already churning with ideas. He needed to know more about how mandrakes matured. Did any ingredients in the standard ageing potion negatively react with mandrake? Some variants called for a mandrake leaf, perhaps that would—

The door to the headmaster’s office slammed open, and Lucius Malfoy strode in. A wretched looking house-elf in a greying pillowcase trailed after him, unnoticed by the man.

“How did he get past the gargoyle?” Burbage murmured, resting her axe against her shoulder. The silver blade caught the light strangely. Goblin-made? Was that the Axe of Hufflepuff?

“Headmaster,” Lucius said, smiling insincerely. “Why am I learning from my son that there has been another attack on a muggleborn student? One of his own housemates? And what’s this I hear about a search of the castle? An *unauthorized* search?”

“Good morning, Lucius,” Dumbledore said. “You’re just in time to join us! And you’ve brought a house-elf with you, splendid.”

Lucius looked down and sneered. “Dobby? What are you doing here?”

The house-elf’s ears drooped and he looked up at Lucius with watery, lambent eyes. “Dobby hasn’t finished polishing Master’s shoes.”

“It’s far too late for that,” Lucius said, whacking the house-elf with his cane. “Go home and do something useful. Blasted house-elves...” Lucius looked at Dumbledore again, his servant forgotten. “Join you? What are you rambling about, Dumbledore?”

Dobby the house-elf limped away, but not before giving Dumbledore a significant look. So it had been Lucius’ house-elf warning Potter. Interesting.

“We were just about to embark on a journey to the Chamber of Secrets,” Dumbledore said, indicating the armed professors in the room.

Lucius gave Hagrid’s cage of roosters a contemptuous look. “The Chamber of Secrets is a myth, headmaster.”

“No, Lucius, I am afraid it is very real. As is the creature it contains. Your father was a student here the last time the Chamber was opened. Surely Abraxas told you stories from that time? Headmaster Dippet planned on shutting down the school.”

Dumbledore stood, and Fawkes flew from his perch to land lightly on the headmaster’s shoulder. “It comforts me to know that a member of the Board of Governors will be accompanying us in securing Hogwarts against this threat.”

He smiled blandly at Lucius, waiting to be contradicted.

“Do not waste my time, Dumbledore,” Lucius said. “If this proves to be a farce, I shall have to bring up your continued employment here with the Board. Two attacks against muggleborns in as many months doesn’t speak well to your ability to keep students safe.”

“Which is why we are dealing with the threat directly, Mr. Malfoy,” McGonagall cut in icily.

Lucius raised one elegant eyebrow. “Lead the way.”

The kitchens were uncharacteristically quiet, absent the constant commotion of house-elves at work. With the castle empty of its inhabitants, far less time was devoted to food preparation, and the house-elves had turned themselves to cleaning the castle. Filch's own cleaning implements were props to make the old man feel useful.

As it was, the kitchens were pristine. The five tables mirroring those above in the Great Hall had been polished to a high sheen, reflecting the ad-hoc group of basilisk hunters. The fires had been built up, and the house-elves had thrown herbs onto the logs, giving the cavernous kitchen a warm, homey atmosphere. Pots, pans, kettles and cauldrons hung on the walls. Meat, bundles of garlic and other drying herbs, rested on hooks hanging from the ceiling. The flagstone floor was spotless.

"I could go for a spot of tea before we descend further into the bowels of the castle," Burbage said idly. There was a clamor from a stack of innocent-looking barrels, and a tray appeared on the table they sat at.

"Thank you," she said happily, taking a steaming cup of tea.

"Do we really have time for this?" Severus said, eyeing the tray of tea and biscuits.

Burbage shrugged, then nodded to where Sprout was speaking with a house-elf. The house-elves had found an arterial pipe which they said led to the Chamber of Secrets, to which a number of other, smaller, pipes connected. The largest of those led into the kitchen.

Lucius was tapping his cane impatiently. For all of his airs, Lucius lacked decorum. His son was equally ill-mannered. Severus sometimes wondered what purebloods would think of the muggle concept of poor breeding, and how easily they fit into that classist convention. The irony was more apparent when one considered the commonality of purebloods having manor homes was borrowed from muggle gentility in an effort to emulate them, to curry favor as the Malfoys had once done before it was no longer the done thing. There was no tradition, only faddish capitulation to the times.

Severus poured himself a cup of tea, and Burbage smiled as if they shared a secret.

At last, the wall was broken open and the pipe was exposed. The headmaster held the wand he possessed out, illuminating the opening of the pipe for them. It was made of some dark metal, likely transfigured from the stone surrounding it, and was wider than the headmaster was tall.

Severus stood with Burbage and walked over to observe. The pipe sloped down at a sharp angle. Some gelatinous substance coated the metal, presumably lubricant for a certain serpent.

"I hope it isn't made out of lead," Burbage said, swinging her axe experimentally. "Just what we'd need on top of a basilisk. Lead poisoning."

"I doubt that is a legitimate concern," Severus said, contemplating the weight of the axe. Where had she even got it?

“Yes, headmaster,” the house-elf was saying. “This goes right to the snakey place.”

“Thank you, Pesca,” Dumbledore said, looking around at the group. One of Hagrid’s roosters gave a deep, baleful croon. “Shall we?”

Their journey through the pipes was long and boring. Madam Pince had done something besides managing the card catalog, for once in her life, and had given a lecture on the history of plumbing in Hogwarts. It was simple convenience, a means to distribute and channel away water without needing a wand or some artificer to maintain the toilets. However, a significant number of the pipes led nowhere at all, connected to nothing, or apparently led to the Chamber of Secrets.

After some time, the pipe let out into a wide stone corridor. The air was chill and clammy, the stones covered in slippery moss in sickly hues.

“I believe we are under the Black Lake,” Dumbledore said, still lighting their way. Severus’ attention was inexorably drawn to the wand, something he could allow with the headmaster’s back turned. He was possibly the only person, other than Dumbledore himself, who knew what exactly that wand was.

There was a crunching sound, and Severus turned to see Burbage stepping on rat skulls like a child jumping on dried leaves.

“It’s a good thing Lockhart had a *family emergency*,” she said, crushing another skull. “He’d be shitting himself.”

“It would be an improvement,” Severus said, drawing a snort from her.

“Think this is called the Corridor of Secrets?” she asked.

Severus shook his head, not wanting to indulge her.

They walked around a bend in the tunnel, their group falling into a subdued silence only broken by the rustling of the caged roosters. There was a fuss when they found a massive snake skin, *basilisk* skin, which Severus was eager to get his hands on. What could be made of such a thing? He briefly considered breeding his own basilisk—he’d have to blind it, of course—for potions parts. Was it really as easy as affixing a toad to a chicken egg? That wasn’t an insurmountable task, though toads weren’t known for their ability to incubate. Some sort of fire toad, then?

Soon they came upon a wall blocking their path. It was decorated with a bas-relief of entwined serpents with coruscating, emerald eyes.

Dumbledore alarmed them all when he briefly hissed at it. Parseltongue wasn’t the usual hissing of a snake. It was a magical language, profound and sibilant tones which ensnared the listener, corroding the edges of comprehension.

It had been years since Severus had last heard it. Heard it over his own screams.

The wall shuddered, a line appearing down the middle, and it slid apart to reveal what Severus assumed was the Chamber of Secrets.

“No accounting for taste,” Burbage said, looking around. “Is that meant to be Slytherin?” She pointed her axe at the giant statue dominating the Chamber. “Bit of a minger, isn’t he?”

“I think this may be a naturally formed cavern under the lake,” Sprout said, peering at the distant ceiling. It was impossible to see it in the gloom, impossible to tell where the greenish, watery light was coming from. Severus doubted the pillars, which had gaudy snake carvings, reached all the way up. These snakes had empty eye sockets. Perhaps when he had been Tom Riddle, Voldemort had prised the emeralds from them to sell.

Dumbledore had revealed to him the Dark Lord’s history. The near-squib mother from a degraded pureblood family, the wealthy and indifferent muggle father who rejected him, the orphanage. Was it meant to humanize the Dark Lord? Severus suspected Voldemort had considered his muggle name, his muggle origins, and his humanity as mere trappings to be shed. What was left of him could hardly be considered human.

“Pomona, the earmuffs if you would,” Dumbledore said. Sprout began passing them around, enlarging a pair to accommodate Hagrid. Severus took his own fuzzy pink pair without comment, and ignored the amused look Burbage gave him.

“And what are these for?” Lucius asked, plainly revolted by the earmuffs.

“It will soon become quite loud in here, Lucius,” Dumbledore said. “There is a little known skill which the basilisk possesses, known as the song of the basilisk. It ensorcells the listener, luring prey to it.”

“I have never heard of such a thing,” Lucius said.

“I should think not,” Dumbledore said lightly. “All who have heard it have died. I endeavor to avoid that fate today. Fawkes?”

The phoenix sang in acknowledgement, flying up to land on Slytherin’s head. They had discussed the plan on their journey, mostly for Lucius’ benefit. Dumbledore would attempt to summon the basilisk, using the information and parseltongue learned from Ginny Weasley’s scrambled memories. Getting the girl to use a Pensieve was a tedium Severus hoped to never relive.

He suspected Dumbledore of interacting with the diary himself. The information it might contain, things only the Dark Lord knew, was invaluable.

“What are you even planning on doing with that thing?” he asked Burbage, looking pointedly at the axe.

She smiled and swung it a few times. “Cut off the head, and the body will die.”

“You intend to decapitate a thousand-year-old basilisk?”

“If the roosters don’t work, yeah. *Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more; Or close the wall up with our English dead.*”

“We’re in Scotland.”

Burbage rolled her eyes, then looked at the statue expectantly.

“Earmuffs on, everyone, and eyes to the ground,” Dumbledore said. “Wait for Fawkes’ signal.”

Severus sighed and put the pink earmuffs on. Burbage gave him a thumbs up and mouthed something he chose not to interpret. He instead looked at the floor, a tried and true method of not looking at a basilisk in the eyes. The chamber shook around them, and something massive fell to the floor. There was a bright flash of fire, the sign that Fawkes had destroyed the basilisk’s eyes.

Severus hadn’t fully come to terms with the creature being a basilisk, nor that it was a basilisk of fifty feet long, with a mouth filled with fangs longer than he was tall, dripping with corrosive venom, once bright green scales pitted and worn with age, thrashing blindly. Hagrid was struggling to get the rooster cage open, but McGonagall pointed her wand and the roosters were out, running in fear.

“*Sonorus gallus*,” Severus incanted, not able to hear himself. The spell struck the bird closest to him in a burst of pale orange light, and the rooster’s beak popped open. The thrashing stopped. He looked up and saw Burbage running towards the fallen basilisk with the axe held over her head. She was on the heavy side, and not a fast runner, but everyone was too surprised to stop her from swinging the goblin-made axe at the basilisk’s neck, severing it in a shower of blood. Severus scowled and ran forward, hastily vanishing the blood from Burbage. It was likely as deadly as the venom.

He started to take off his earmuffs, until he realized the roosters were still crowing at a deafening volume.

“You stupid woman,” he said as Burbage turned to him, beaming.

“What’s that?” she mouthed, tilting her head. “I can’t hear you.”

Phoenix Down

Chapter Summary

December 1992

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A jubilant Charity Burbage carted the basilisk's head off to Madam Pomfrey for analysis. Its ability to petrify through indirect eye contact was not something previously known, and while a living specimen would have been preferable for research purposes, it was agreed that the basilisk was better off dead. Hagrid had silently wept the entire walk back. There was something noble in being able to appreciate all creatures for simply being, but Severus was of the opinion that some things needed to be put down. Such as the basilisk that attacked his son.

Flitwick, Sprout, and some house-elves had been left in the Chamber of Secrets to further investigate, particularly the tunnel that the mouth of Slytherin's statue had turned into. The basilisk's nest. Were there others? If one basilisk, why not two?

Severus, along with McGonagall, Lucius, and Dumbledore, retired to the headmaster's office. Fawkes had arrived before them, and was busily cleaning basilisk sclera from his claws.

"I hope you are satisfied that Hogwarts is secure once more, Lucius," Dumbledore said amiably, settling into his chair. "The basilisk has been slain, the Chamber of Secrets will be closed once more. I dare say it shall never open again."

Severus watched Lucius' reaction. The Malfoys were universally pale, but Lucius was presently near translucent, clammy and twitching nervously. His clothes were splattered with rank Chamber water, streaked with mud and the slimy substance coating the pipe. He was so discomposed he couldn't even cast simple charms to keep himself presentable.

Severus had no pity for the man. He had been surrounded by competent witches and wizards while confronting the basilisk. He hadn't been alone, hadn't been a child coming face to face with a monster found only in the darkest tomes and most bloodcurdling nightmares.

Lucius cleared his throat. "While it is, ah, admirable that you take such a direct approach in ensuring the safety of the students, it seems as if you have elided one highly pertinent point."

"Oh?" Dumbledore asked.

"The culprit behind these attacks," Lucius said, standing straight so as to gaze imperiously down on an unimpressed Dumbledore.

“We identified the culprit before seeking out the Chamber,” the headmaster said, pulling open a drawer. “Somehow, a student got hold of a diary from Lord Voldemort’s school days.”

Dumbledore set the plain black diary on his desk.

“Fascinating how, shortly after the Muggle Protection Act was presented to the Wizengamot, a cursed artifact made its way into Hogwarts, targeting muggleborns,” Dumbledore said lightly. “It is even more remarkable that such an object was overlooked in the various raids the Ministry has conducted. Including some just last week. Perhaps the Ministry missed a few things?”

“Remarkable,” Lucius said through clenched teeth.

“One wonders how a student came to possess such a thing,” Dumbledore continued. “After all, very few people know that Lord Voldemort was once a young man named Tom Riddle. A young man who was in the same year and house as your own father.”

Lucius’ hand tightened on his cane. “What exactly are you implying, Dumbledore?”

Dumbledore leaned forward. “I think it would be quite easy to trace this object back to its originator, Lucius, if certain aggrieved fathers are sufficiently motivated.”

Severus kept his expression neutral.

“We can only hope this incident doesn’t repeat itself,” Dumbledore said, “and that Lord Voldemort hasn’t left any other school things with people eager to give them away.”

Lucius visibly struggled to collect himself. “This conversation has been illuminating, headmaster. I’m afraid I have to excuse myself as I have pressing matters to attend to.”

“I’m sure you do,” McGonagall said drily.

Lucius shot her a dirty look, briefly nodded at Severus, spun around and left the office. The door clicked shut behind him.

“Was it wise to antagonize him, Albus?” McGonagall asked.

Dumbledore pressed his fingers together. “In most cases, house-elves cannot be called to testify, even house-elves who have been dismissed. It is as much for their protection as their masters’. A house-elf who implicates a witch or wizard may soon find themselves out of a home, or worse. By that same token, we place incredible trust in house-elves. That Dobby betrayed his master in an effort to protect Monty Potter shows astounding strength of character, and I fear Dobby is the only one who knows the entire truth of the matter. We can speculate that Lucius Malfoy placed the diary among Ginny Weasley’s school books, but no one actually witnessed it.”

Severus sneered. “I can get him to talk.”

“The house-elf?” McGonagall asked. “That poor creature...”

“No, Lucius,” he said. “A few drops of Veritaserum and he’ll be spilling all of his secrets.”

Dumbledore sighed. “That wouldn’t be admissible, Severus. You are perfectly aware how strictly regulated truth serums are. It would only bring trouble down on yourself.”

A hand touched Severus’ arm.

“I know you’re upset that justice isn’t being done here,” McGonagall said. “We’re professors, our duty is to our students. Any investigation should be rightfully left to the Ministry.”

Severus could have laughed at that. The Ministry was a joke.

“Minerva is correct,” Dumbledore said. “We have just under two weeks until term resumes, in which we can make some progress in improving Hogwarts’ defenses.”

Severus gave him an incredulous look. “You may spend hours discussing the ever-growing list of banned items with Filch if you so desire. I have work to do.”

Monty wandered around the empty, drafty castle. Now that the basilisk was dead, he and the other student staying had full run of Hogwarts, though the portraits were more attentive and the ghosts more present than usual. The girl, Luna Lovegood, had skipped off somewhere as soon as the hospital wing had been reopened. It was odd being there with all of the school staff, curtains drawn around Colin and Harry, the blizzard still raging outside. Anxiously waiting.

He thought about flying, but that was out of the question given the weather. There was Exploding Snap and wizard’s chess, but you needed at least one other player for Snap, and he had only one set of chessmen, and, again, no one to play against. If he could find that girl, maybe she would be up for a game?

Monty was bored, but he was used to boredom and it didn’t bother him overly much. Being able to walk around was already miles above being locked in the cupboard. Sometimes he’d only be let out to use the toilet, or to do chores, and was otherwise stuck in the dark for hours, days, on end. Sleeping, listening to his own thoughts, holding his breath to hear whatever the Dursleys were watching on the telly.

He wasn’t really sure what kids his age did for fun, or what anyone did. It was easier with Ron, since Ron had his own hobbies and Monty could just do what he did. Quidditch, wizard’s chess, Chocolate Frog cards. Hermione, on the other hand, read all the time.

Monty had always wished he’d had something to read in the cupboard. And a light bulb so he could see what he was reading. Stealing Dudley’s books and using light coming in through the cracks strained his eyes.

He now had access to an entire magical library, but it was overwhelming. It was hard to know where to start when he didn't know anything at all.

A sudden weight on his shoulder made Monty jump. There was a little screech, and he relaxed. He turned his head slightly and saw it was Harry's small thestral. Monty struggled for a moment to remember its name.

"Benjy," he said, smiling when the thestral screeched again. "What are you doing here?"

Monty knew it was just a toy, but was amazed by how lifelike the thestral was. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought it was a living animal.

He didn't know any better.

You have stepped into a world you know nothing about, and from what I have seen you have made little to no effort in familiarizing yourself with it.

Monty scowled as he recalled Professor Snape's words from the evening before. It wasn't *his* fault he'd been lied to his entire life. It wasn't *his* fault he'd never had any friends. It wasn't like his book list in first year had a how-to guide for being the Boy Who Lived, or a primer on living in the magical world when all you'd known was muggles. Monty had even thought talking to snakes was normal, until Harry had told him otherwise.

Monty thought about Hermione's frustration when she tried to talk to him and Ron about something, only to be met with blank stares. Harry's gentle chiding. Snape's disappointment when students didn't apply themselves, the subsequent explosions and melted cauldrons.

There had been a niggling feeling at the back of his mind since he had first stepped into the Leaky Cauldron, when his name, his face, his scar had been recognized by so many people eager to meet him. There were expectations the world had of him, which was such a drastic shift from the Dursleys who had no expectations for him at all. And with those undefined expectations there was the persistent worry that nothing he did would ever meet them. At least with quidditch it was straightforward, the expectations clear.

Monty had gone from being nothing special to being the savior of the magical world, suspended between those two polarities. It was easier not to think about it at all. To be average. The only thing he was really good at was quidditch, and he'd only got on the team by chance. What else was he good at? What did he *want* to be good at?

He was shaken from his thoughts when he walked into someone.

"Sorry," he said, pushing up his glasses. He had run into the first-year girl staying at Hogwarts for the holiday too.

"You're Monty Potter," the girl said dreamily.

"You're Luna Lovegood, right?" Monty asked.

"I am," she said, focusing on him with extraordinarily pale grey eyes. They were the color of ghosts.

“What’s that you’ve got?” Monty asked, pointing at what looked like a bundle of bones and string.

“It’s a ball of bones,” Luna said. “I made it myself. I was going to go play with the thestrals. Daddy says Hogwarts has the only trained herd in Europe.”

They had run into each other near a window, which was currently rattling as the blizzard outside battered the castle.

“I think it would be hard to find them in this weather,” Monty said. “Maybe Benjy could play with it?”

Luna looked at his shoulder and smiled. Monty realized Luna could see the little thestral too. Which meant she had also seen someone die. He shied away from wondering who it had been, knowing it was a mean question. People brought up the deaths of his parents a lot, and his scar, and other things he’d prefer not to talk about.

“We could go visit Hagrid when the weather clears up,” he suggested. “He probably knows where the thestrals are.”

Luna blinked slowly at him. “Interesting.”

“Huh?”

“Your wrackspurts are less agitated. They were quite worked up, you know.”

“What are wrackspurts?” Monty asked, feeling stupid. Yet another thing everyone knew about that he didn’t.

“Invisible creatures that float into your ears,” Luna said, looking at his ears. “They make your brain go fuzzy.”

“Can you see them?” he asked.

“Sometimes I feel them,” Luna said, still looking at his ears.

“That’s amazing,” Monty said. He’d never heard of anyone being able to sense invisible creatures. What other magical abilities did people have?

“So, do you like animals?” Monty asked. “I mean, creatures?”

“I do,” Luna said. “Do you like animals and creatures?”

“Is there a difference?” he asked. “If there is, I like both. Well, most,” Monty amended. “I’ve got an owl named Hedwig. She was my first friend.”

Luna smiled at him. There was something...different about her. Something inherently magical, like a fairy. “She is a snowy owl, right? I’ve seen her visiting you in the Great Hall.”

“She is. It’s the perfect weather for her.”

“She is very beautiful,” Luna said.

Monty had an idea. “Would you like to meet her? We could go up to the Owlery.”

“That sounds lovely,” Luna said. “Perhaps the owls would also like a ball of bones.”

Monty wasn’t sure about that, but it couldn’t hurt to check.

The clack of pestle against mortar, the snap of the fire, a bubbling cauldron.

Severus methodically ground aglaophotis petals into a paste. He stopped paying attention to the time, it was an arbitrary contrivance, other than a way to measure the space between events.

Straining crushed ferthberries, decanting the ghost lichen, sifting the dragon bone meal. Crushing petals against stone.

He glanced at the chalkboard, checking the equation yet again. Six drops, six months. Sprout had been by at some point, leaving three potted mandrakes. He had administered the standard ageing potion to one, the control mandrake. No effect. He’d read a treatise on mandrakes written six centuries prior, in Middle English, scratched onto the skin of some piebald animal. He knew everything he needed to know about mandrakes.

He continued crushing the petals. He needed a smooth paste.

The incessant grinding of stone against stone.

Food had been sent to him at some point. He had ignored it, not feeling hungry, or thirsty, or tired, or much of anything other than the need to heal his son.

It was a shame they didn’t have Weasley’s Time-Turner. He didn’t care how hard the Ministry came down on unauthorized use.

He glanced at the board again. Mandrake.

Mandragora.

He stopped grinding the petals.

“God fucking damnit,” he said hoarsely, slamming down the mortar.

There was a knock at the door.

“What?” he snapped, furious with himself. *Mandragora*. That changed everything.

The door creaked open, and the cherubic face of Charity Burbage appeared.

“Tetchy,” she said, eyes darting around his office as the door opened wider. “You look like a mad scientist. Mad potioneer, I guess.”

Severus stared at her in the way that made his students quail. “Was there something you needed, Professor Burbage?”

“Just Charity’s fine,” she said, stepping fully into his office. “You missed breakfast. And lunch. And dinner. I volunteered to make sure you were still breathing.”

Severus closed his eyes, bracing himself on the table his work was spread out on. “Did this absence not indicate that I was to be left alone?”

Burbage was frowning at one of the many chalkboards he had conjured, which were covered with his thoughts, arithmantic equations, ingredients analysis, information on mandrakes, calculations which he needed to recalculate, factoring in the Latin name for the plant.

“Obviously you care about that kid a lot,” Burbage said, surprising the hell out of him. Was it really that obvious? That was...Harry could be targeted to get to him. The thought made him nauseous.

“Heads of house act *in loco parentis*,” he said, watching Burbage tap her lips thoughtfully, still looking at the board. “Evans has no family, therefore he is my responsibility.”

Burbage nodded, then turned to look at him. “You could ask us for help, you know.”

Severus bristled. “I *am* the potions master of this school.”

She raised her eyebrows, looking pointedly at the mess of arithmancy on the board.

“I am proficient in arithmancy as well.”

“Right, sure,” she said, smiling faintly. “That explains the sign error.”

Severus stared at her. “Excuse me?”

“Here,” Burbage said, tapping the board. “This is meant to be the potential energy for...some kind of seed. Mandrake? Does Sprout even have any? It doesn’t matter. You shifted the period incorrectly.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, then glanced at the board. “How.”

“Is that a question?” Burbage asked. “Or are you surprised the duffer Muggle Studies teacher is a dab hand at arithmancy? I’ve got dual honors in economics and sociology.”

“I see,” Severus said. “Why Muggle Studies, then, and not a career in arithmancy?”

Burbage shrugged. “You know what it was like in school. All us muggleborns thought it was only a matter of time before the Death Eaters came knocking. Blasting the door off the

hinges. My first love was arithmancy, but, well, *from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs*. People needed to stand against blood purism, and that ideology hasn't gone away simply because the Dork Lord has."

"Dork Lord," Severus said slowly. The woman was mad.

"Muggle Studies was the easy O class," she continued. "People phoned it in. They didn't even know what *telephones* were, calling them *fellytones*. Honestly, it was shite. It deserves someone who can do it justice."

"And you're that person?" Severus asked, raising an eyebrow.

Burbage smiled widely at him. "I am. Anyway, you look like shit. I can help with whatever you're doing, even if it's just checking your work. Will you let me?"

Severus closed his eyes, gathering the tattered remains of his patience. "If it will shut you up, fine."

A cup of coffee thudded down in front of him.

"Black as your soul," Burbage said with a grin.

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"What?" she asked. "I've sat next to you three meals a day for three months. You think I didn't notice your preferences?"

It was true that one of the first things he had noticed about Burbage was the eldritch abomination she called *tea*. "Thank you."

"No trouble," she said. "You ought to rest, though. You've been going at it for ages.

"I need to keep working," Severus said, taking a sip of his coffee. He froze, then looked into the cup.

Burbage snorted. "I didn't put anything in it if that's what you're worried about. That's more your wheelhouse. Anyway, doesn't caffeine nullify lavender?"

"So students do retain some information post-graduation," he said, taking another sip.

"Yeah, I'm sure that's a concern of yours," she said, covering up a yawn. "Seriously, though, it's the middle of the night. If you're stuck, you should sleep on it. You've already killed one mandrake."

The potion had worked, mostly, except the mandrake hadn't stopped ageing. It had grown older and older, gradually shriveling until it crumbled into dust.

"That's what I did in uni," she continued. "Go to sleep thinking about a problem, wake up with a solution."

Severus kept drinking the coffee.

Burbage threw her hands in the air. "Fine, what do I know!"

"You're the one who brought coffee."

"So I'm an enabler now, great!"

He smirked at her. "There is some merit to your suggestion. A brief period of rest will allow the caffeine to take effect."

"You do that then," Burbage said, yawning again. "I'm cream crackered. Have your *brief period of rest* and we'll meet back in the morning, yeah?"

Severus nodded absently, staring into the depths of his coffee. It really did take some time for it to have an effect. His brain felt completely scoured, a hollow wind blowing disconnected thoughts around. He was penned in by what little progress he had made. He needed to adjust the potion, or find a way to stop the age progression

"I'll see myself out," Burbage said softly.

The door shut behind her, and Severus laid his head on his desk. Just a few minutes of rest was all he needed. He wasn't of any use in his current state. Harry needed him...

Severus jerked upright, upsetting the cold, half drunk cup of coffee. He had no idea what time it was, but it didn't matter. He took a moment to make sure all his clothes were on, and that he didn't look as wrecked as he felt, then shambled out of his office. A few corridors away he managed a more normal gait, striding out of the dungeons, squinting against the sudden daylight in the entrance hall—the blizzard had finally cleared, and the sun was at its horrid winter angle—then up the grand staircase, wincing at the sun reflecting brightly off of the recently polished marble, and to the headmaster's office.

"Sherbet Lemon," he said to the gargoyle, rolling his eyes. The gargoyle leapt aside, and Severus didn't wait for the stairs to start moving. He took them two at a time. The door at the top was closed, but it opened at a touch. Dumbledore wasn't at his desk, but Severus wasn't there for the headmaster.

Fawkes the phoenix looked at him curiously.

“I need a feather,” Severus said, approaching the smoldering bird.

Fawkes stared at him.

“A down feather,” Severus clarified.

Fawkes kept staring.

Severus closed his eyes. He would fight an immortal bird if he had to. Fawkes sang a few notes, and he looked at the bird again.

“Please?” he tried.

Fawkes ruffled his feathers, and a single golden down feather drifted to the floor.

“Thank you,” Severus said, carefully picking it up.

He hurried out of the office and back to the dungeons, running past an exhausted Burbage who squawked at him. Severus barely noticed the woman following him, bursting into his office and summoning the ingredients he needed.

He looked up briefly when the door shut, to find Burbage doubled over and clutching her side. “Told you,” she wheezed. “Needed to sleep on it.”

Severus didn’t acknowledge that, setting a copper cauldron to heat while he prepared the ingredients with practiced ease. Time passed unnoticed, and eventually the cauldron roiled with the thick, off yellow concoction which had killed the first mandrake. Severus narrowed his eyes, watching bubbles form, waiting for the consistency to be just so.

He dropped the down feather in.

There was a flash of light, bright as a phoenix flame, and the potion turned a shimmering gold.

“Pretty,” Burbage said. “Is that it then?”

“Yes,” Severus said. “Get the earmuffs.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” she said, producing a fuzzy pink pair.

Severus gave her an unamused look.

“It looks good on you,” Burbage said, revealing a teal pair for herself. “Mandrake time?”

He nodded, and Burbage carried over one of the pots, setting it heavily on the desk. She gripped the stem with both hands and yanked the mandrake fully out. It was about the size of a ten-year-old child, and looked like it was throwing a temper tantrum. Burbage restrained the thrashing mandrake, and Severus carefully dripped the potion into its wailing mouth.

They watched as the mandrake’s veins flashed gold, and it began to grow.

Chapter End Notes

Hi!!

Thank you for all of your comments, they are really fun to read! Shame Charity didn't get to keep the basilisk head as a trophy

I've just had a short story published in [Penumbria](#), called Ariana, if you want to check it out. It's about a lady who can punch through people.

Levitation Charms

Chapter Summary

Christmas 1992

It was Christmas Eve, and someone had the asinine idea to decorate the castle.

Severus strode past wreaths and mistletoe, suits of armor wrapped in tinsel, Peeves bellowing *My Baby Gave Me a Hippogriff for Christmas* and jangling bells out of time. Fairies and baubles and towering pine trees so heavily ornamented their skinny branches creaked under the weight.

He wasn't in a festive mood.

Inside the infirmary hopes were high. Colin Creevey's parents had been brought by McGonagall, along with the boy's younger brother who was vibrating with excitement. Andromeda Tonks stood next to Harry's bed, looking worriedly down at him. Filch was standing sentry next to Mrs. Norris, who was in a fluffy cat bed placed onto a hospital bed, her legs sticking straight up.

Madam Pomfrey wasn't sure what would happen when the Mandrake Restorative Draught was administered. There was some talk about what would be done once those petrified were awakened, but there was a possibility they already *were* awake. For Colin Creevey, and Mrs. Norris, that was approaching two months without sleep, without food, without breathing, staring into space. Magic could heal them, help them recover faster, but there was no telling what psychological trauma they had suffered.

Mrs. Norris was first, not out of priority but because Severus wanted to test the draught on her before using it on his son. He was confident it would work. The mandrake had reached the appropriate age. Nothing unusual happened when he prepared the restorative.

Filch stood tensely next to him as Severus trickled the potion into Mrs. Norris' open mouth.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the cat shuddered, glowing with a soft golden light, and for the first time in weeks her body relaxed.

Then Mrs. Norris started screaming.

"It's okay," Filch said, trying to calm his panicking cat. "You're not petrified anymore! Mrs. Norris!"

Filch tried picking her up, but Mrs. Norris yowled and spat and clawed his face, thrashing madly.

“*Dormio*,” Madam Pomfrey said. The cat passed out.

“What have you done?” Filch said, spinning to confront her.

“She needs rest, Argus,” Madam Pomfrey said.

“She’s been petrified! She’s *been* resting!”

Madam Pomfrey shook her head. “Her body has, but her mind hasn’t. We’ll need Kettleburn and Hagrid for this, they’ll have a better idea of what to do for her now. It will take some time for her to adjust. Physically, she *should* be fine. The basilisk put their bodies in a sort of stasis, as far as I can tell. Maybe a dark, quiet place for her...”

Madam Pomfrey shook her head, looking at Colin Creevey. “This doesn’t bode well for the children.”

Filch’s lip trembled, and tears dripped onto Mrs. Norris’ fur.

Severus left him to cry over his cat, then approached the Creeveys. After seeing Mrs. Norris’ reaction, they were looking less optimistic.

“Maybe you should take Dennis outside,” Mrs. Creevey said to her husband. “They can visit later.”

Mr. Creevey nodded, then guided his youngest son out of the hospital wing. Both Potter and Lovegood had expressed interest in being there for the depetrifications but had been turned down. Severus was glad they had been kept away.

“We were hoping to take Colin home,” Mrs. Creevey said. “For a family Christmas.”

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips. “There is a Creature-Induced Injuries ward at St. Mungo’s. It might be best to transfer Colin there, and your family can visit him. It’s in London, much easier to get to.”

Mrs. Creevey nodded. She moved to sit down next to Creevey’s bed, taking one of her son’s frozen hands. Madam Pomfrey looked ready to object, but only shook her head, standing to the side to allow Severus to administer the restorative.

Colin Creevey woke up screaming. His mother winced as he tore his hand away, covering his eyes and sobbing.

“Colin, love, can you hear me?” Mrs. Creevey asked, her hands hovering uncertainly.

“We need to either put him to sleep or put him in a quiet room,” Madam Pomfrey said, conjuring a blindfold and earmuffs for the boy. “It’s probably too much stimulation for him, but until he is able to tell us what is happening, I can only speculate.”

“Should I not touch him?” Mrs. Creevey asked, sobbing as her son curled into a ball and covered his head with shaking arms.

“One of the last things he saw was a very frightening creature,” Madam Pomfrey said gently. “He might still be afraid.”

Severus left them to their conversation, stepping through the curtains around Colin’s bed. He didn’t envy McGonagall explaining to Creevey’s parents why it was safe for him to remain at Hogwarts, or in the magical world at all.

It was now Harry’s turn.

Harry had missed his dentist appointment, which Severus had managed to reschedule for the new year. And he’d missed his appointment with Andromeda, who was here in Madam Pomfrey’s stead. If Madam Pomfrey’s bodily stasis theory was correct, then Harry’s body had been preserved in whatever state it had been when he made eye contact with the basilisk. Which meant, given the highly stressful event of encountering a basilisk, it was likely he was experiencing an acute adrenal crisis. Possibly for the past few days, frozen in time.

There was a sudden silence, cutting off Colin Creevey’s continued screaming. Severus closed his eyes, took a steadying breath. If they had put more effort into ascertaining the boy’s state, they could have found alternatives to the Mandrake Restorative Draught sooner. Only his own child being in danger had spurred him into action.

“Are you ready?” he asked Andromeda.

She held a syringe filled with hydrocortisone, some muggle medication. He needed to develop a potion analog.

“I am,” Andromeda said. “Once he’s stabilized, I can perform the transfiguration. We may want to keep him unconscious this time around.”

Severus nodded stiffly. Unlike Creevey and Mrs. Norris, Harry’s mouth was shut. He had to spell the potion into him. He did so, and watched with bated breath as his son began to glow.

Harry gasped, then squeezed his eyes shut. Everything was too bright, too loud, too much. He felt like his body was on fire, burning from within. His heart beat frantically, not quite catching up with the current state of affairs. He struggled to think, fighting against the dizziness and nausea. He knew he had been petrified, but not for how long. His thoughts had stretched on infinitely, interminable, moving too slowly to complete.

He doubled over, clutching his stomach. His wand was still in his hand. He gripped it tightly. It was only for a split second, but he had seen how impossibly gigantic the basilisk was. He would have had to bring the whole castle down on top of them to stop it.

“Harry, can you hear me?” someone asked.

He nodded, then started laughing uncontrollably, which made his stomach hurt more.

“I need to give you an injection,” the person said. “It’s going into your thigh,” they said, touching the location. “You can keep your wand, but try not to cast anything, okay?”

He nodded again. There was a sharp pinch, then a chill as fluid was injected into his leg. Harry scrunched his face in discomfort as it started to burn, then ache.

“How long?” he managed to say.

“Six days,” a deep, familiar voice said. “We found the Chamber and killed the basilisk.”

“Knew it,” Harry said, smiling tightly.

Someone touched his shoulder. “Andromeda needs to do the transfiguration now. Do you want to be put to sleep?”

“No,” Harry said, squirming so he was on his stomach, biting back the urge to vomit. Six days. How had they been unpetrified? His dad must have found another way.

“Alright, Harry, I’m going to start,” Andromeda said.

He nodded again, pressing his face into a pillow.

“Just please get it over with,” he muttered, shuddering as Andromeda’s magic washed over him. Harry hated it. He hated it so much. It felt wrong, and it hurt, but it made him feel better. Eventually. It was all too much, but he understood that his dad and Andromeda were worried about him, worried about whatever effect the basilisk’s gaze had on his complicated body.

As Andromeda transfigured his adrenal glands into something that would actually function, Harry started to cry.

Severus’ crossed arms tightened around himself as he listened to his son cry in pain. Harry preferred that his treatment with Andromeda was done in private, and Severus silently left the boy with Andromeda to watch over him.

Harry always apologized afterwards, said he couldn’t help it, it was simply a physical reaction. Severus wanted to tell him he didn’t need an excuse to cry.

McGonagall was in the infirmary too, having returned from escorting the Creeveys to St. Mungo’s. Kettleburn and Hagrid had been summoned and were inspecting the unconscious Mrs. Norris.

“Do you still think there should be no consequences, Minerva?” he asked McGonagall. “Creevey is Weasley’s classmate. She sat next to him every day. God knows how long it will take for him to be functional again.”

McGonagall gave him a dark look. “The same could be said for Ginny Weasley. She might not have been petrified, but she is still a victim.”

Severus shook his head, disgusted by the entire situation. Did McGonagall expect Creevey to sit next to Weasley in classes as if nothing had happened?

“It’s not going to be common knowledge that Ginny was the one who brought in the diary,” McGonagall said. “Nor that it was a diary at all.”

Severus snorted. Potter already knew. But McGonagall was right. They had no idea what that diary was. Was the Dark Lord behind this, or had Lucius acted of his own accord? What did the diary mean to the Dark Lord? Was it simply cursed? What lengths would he go to to get it back?

He recalled what Flitwick said. *Black magic*. Magic that dealt in death. He’d have to talk to Flitwick about it, see if the man could elaborate. Dumbledore wouldn’t speak at any length about the diary, which made Severus uneasy.

What was the headmaster hiding?

Madam Pomfrey wanted to keep Harry for the night, at least, but it was Christmas Eve and Harry had things to do. He was relieved that the basilisk was dead, the Chamber closed once more. His dad had told him, over McGonagall’s protests, that Ginny Weasley had a cursed diary of Voldemort’s which possessed her.

Two years, two times Voldemort had possessed someone. It couldn’t be a coincidence that it had only started once Monty began at Hogwarts. You’d have to be blind not to make the connection.

But the diary was gone now, Ginny Weasley was free of its influence. Colin Creevey would take some time to recover, but Harry had been petrified less than a week and was much better off. The school was on alert now, its defense having been breached by Voldemort twice. Hopefully the rest of the year would proceed as normal.

As he exited the hospital wing, Harry was surprised to find two people waiting for him. It was his brother, with Benjy sleeping on top of his head, and the Ravenclaw firstie he’d accidentally hit with *levicorpus* in dueling club.

“Hello, Harry Evans,” the girl said.

“Hello, Luna Lovegood,” he said, bemused. “Hello, Monty Potter. What are you two doing here?”

“I wanted to...we wanted to visit you and Colin, but Madam Pomfrey wouldn’t let us,” Monty said. “Are you better now?”

Harry was better in the sense he was no longer petrified. He had been vindicated. But school had been unpleasant. People had still said awful things about him. He hadn't even begun processing his feelings about Ginny Weasley.

She hadn't done anything on purpose, but she also hadn't got any help. But what if it had been Monty? Except Monty had been raised in the muggle world, he had no baseline for what was considered normal with respect to magic.

There was also the ache in his kidneys, the actual experience of being petrified, confusing memories, the image of the basilisk behind him, fangs dripping, poised to strike. The musky stench of snake, those violent, hateful eyes. The fear and helplessness, the knowledge he was going to die.

"I'm fine," he said, smiling. "I wasn't petrified for that long. I'm glad I didn't miss any school. It's going to take Creevey some time to catch up."

Monty smiled back. Luna seemed the kind to smile all the time, though hers was a little vacant, off with the fairies.

"Dinner?" he said, starting to walk. Monty and Luna joined him, Luna skipping while looking all over the place like a little bird.

"Sorry about hitting you with that spell," Harry said.

Luna looked at him, her big eyes sparkling. "It's alright. I got to fly!"

"They are nicer spells to use for flight," Harry said. "Well, levitation."

"And brooms," Monty said.

"Maybe you could fly with Hedwig," Luna suggested.

"That's...a really good idea," Monty said. "Or we could all go together?"

"I'd like that," Luna said. "It would be like having friends."

"I think it would simply *be* having friends," Harry said, wondering why Luna didn't have any. He didn't pay much attention to the lower years, particularly not in other houses. He didn't know Luna, but he could tell she was probably the *weird kid* in her year. The one who got picked on the most.

"What spells are there to levitate people?" Monty asked. "I know the Levitation Charm can't be used on people, or animals...creatures."

"There are a lot of variants," Harry said. "Hover charms, rocket charms, floating charms. There are a few specifically used to levitate people, like the Puppet Charm." He paused, looking at Monty and Luna, who had been listening with rapt attention. "Would you two like a demonstration?"

Severus was the picture of serenity as he waited for his son to appear in the Great Hall. As the Chamber of Secrets situation had been resolved, most of the staff had departed to spend the holiday with their friends and families. It was the usual suspects among the staff. Dumbledore, McGonagall, Hagrid, Filch, and Severus.

Dumbledore, who had been at odds with his brother longer than any of them had been alive. McGonagall, who hadn't been the same after the death of her younger brother, then the death of her husband. Severus knew she blamed herself for both, though why he didn't know. Hagrid was an orphan, or as good as. No one knew where his giantess mother was, if she was still alive. Giants lived violent lives. Filch was an enigma. Many squibs were cast out of their families, exiled to the muggle world, yet he resided at Hogwarts.

And there was Severus, with a son he couldn't acknowledge, his son's half brother who he was supposed to hate.

The Great Hall had been reduced to one table, at which Severus sat impatiently as his colleagues chatted with each other. Filch had brought the still sleeping Mrs. Norris with him, giving her her own seat, a protective hand on her back.

"Ah, there they are," Dumbledore said, looking towards the entrance hall.

Severus looked too, then suppressed a groan as he saw Harry walking in with two floating children behind him.

Harry paused for a moment, perhaps realizing how ridiculous it looked, but proceeded into the Great Hall, directing Potter and Lovegood, both who looked positively thrilled at being levitated around.

"How delightful to see our students getting along," the headmaster said warmly. "It seems Mr. Evans has recovered from his ordeal."

Severus twitched. How many people had looked into the eyes of a basilisk and lived? That wasn't an experience one got over in a matter of hours.

Harry carefully lowered Lovegood and Potter into seats, demonstrating impressive control for his age. Dumbledore politely clapped, which McGonagall joined, while Hagrid laughed uproariously. Filch shook his head, muttering to himself and petting Mrs. Norris.

"Good show, Mr. Evans," Dumbledore said. "I believe Filius doesn't teach the Puppet Charm until sixth year."

"I read ahead, sir," Harry said sheepishly.

"That was wicked," Potter said excitedly. "Can you teach me that spell?"

"I can," Harry said, smiling fondly. "We might want to work up to it, though."

Severus glanced at Dumbledore, and saw the headmaster watching this exchange with interest. The house-elves chose that moment to send up the food, distracting them, and the conversation moved on.

The Weasleys didn't go to Egypt for Christmas. They silently agreed it would be better for Ginny if they remained home at the Burrow, somewhere familiar. It was decided instead that Bill would be coming home. Charlie as well, taking a leave from the dragon sanctuary. It was for the best. Everyone loved Bill and Charlie. Percy tried to be there for Ginny, but she had indicated she wanted to be left alone by slamming her bedroom door shut.

It was fine. Percy knew he wasn't anyone's favorite brother. Everyone loved Bill and Charlie. His mother was over the moon to see her eldest sons again. They had fascinating stories to tell about cursed tombs and nesting mothers.

There was talk about admitting Ginny to St. Mungo's. They had a ward in Artifact Accidents for people who had been possessed. There was talk about keeping Ginny home from Hogwarts for the rest of the year, but after more slammed doors it was decided that Ginny would return. If the school allowed her to. Bringing this up sent Ginny into a panic. There was more crying, more slamming of doors.

Percy was up early Christmas morning, carrying presents down to add to the pile. His mother was already up, working on something in the kitchen. Through the door Percy could see Bill with her. He didn't blame his siblings for preferring Bill and Charlie. He looked up to both of his older brothers too, particularly Bill. He was following in Bill's footsteps, after all. Everyone liked Bill.

"Dad's been talking about sending Ginny to a muggle doctor," Bill said in a low tone. "A therapist."

"Out of the question," his mother said. "Can you imagine her trying to talk to a muggle about cursed diaries and basilisks? They'd think she really *was* mad!"

Bill's shoulders dropped. "Maybe we could find a squib therapist? Stephen might know someone."

"We haven't spoken in years, you know that," his mother said. "I doubt he'd appreciate an owl showing up out of the blue!"

"Mum, Ginny needs more help than we can give her," Bill said gently.

"Nonsense," his mother said. "She'll buck up in no time. Pass the eggs would you, dear? And besides," she said over the cracking of eggs, "she's got Percy to look after her at Hogwarts."

The stairs creaked, and Percy retreated to the living room, putting presents with the appropriate piles. Charlie appeared at the bottom of the staircase.

“Morning, Perce,” Charlie said through a yawn. “Happy Christmas. Is anyone up?”

“Happy Christmas, Charles. Mother is in the kitchen with William,” Percy said, straightening one of the ornaments. It was a dog-shaped wood cutout that Ron had painted years ago. He’d made the ribbon around its neck orange.

Charlie shook his head and walked to the kitchen, where their mother greeted him happily. A short time later there was a small explosion, a lot of shouting, and Fred and George pelted down the stairs chased by Ron and Ginny. Percy sought the safety of the couch. Their father came down last, and soon they were all sitting around the tree, passing each other presents.

“Oh, I should have sent those boys something,” his mother fretted, watching Ginny open her dark green jumper.

“They’re petrified, mum,” Fred said, discreetly swapping jumpers with George. “It’s not like they’d notice.”

“Actually,” Percy said, noticing Ginny’s face had fallen, “we got an owl from Professor McGonagall late last night. Both Creevey and Evans have been unpetrified.”

Percy opened his own jumper as his family celebrated the good news, lifting Ginny’s spirits again. It was purple. His mother had knitted a golden P on it this year too, and he briefly wondered if she sometimes forgot his name since the only others with letters were Fred and George. At least she’d got his favorite color right. Ron was groaning over his burgundy one, as if color-changing charms didn’t exist. Their mother had put in more effort for Charlie and Bill, knitting a dragon and a sarcophagus respectively.

The last present in Percy’s pile didn’t say who it was from. He picked it up, curious. From the shape and weight, he could tell it was a book, wrapped in parchment. Percy unwrapped it, and was momentarily transfixed by the title. *Prefects Who Gained Power*.

“What’s that?” George asked, leaning over. Amazingly, he didn’t immediately make a joke. “Who’s it from?”

There was only one person who would have sent it.

“A fellow prefect,” Percy said, setting the book with the rest of his gifts, as if it didn’t mean anything.

He should have encouraged his mother to send something to the petrification victims. Maybe it wasn’t too late.

Severus Snape didn't get presents.

The Parma Violets Harry had sent the previous year had been an aberration, and a surprisingly astute choice. He had half expected muggle candy again that year, but the shape of the package was wrong.

It was wrapped in plain parchment with no indication of the sender. Inside, he found something that made his heart stop.

It was a picture of him and Lily, before Hogwarts, sitting on a hill. It must have been taken by Lily's father, he was always taking pictures. Severus had no idea where Harry had found it, why it had survived the dissolution of his friendship with Lily.

There was a second picture, one of Lily holding a black-haired baby with dark, intelligent eyes. She was asleep, her dark red hair strewn around her in disarray. He doubted she even knew the picture had been taken, else it would have been destroyed.

Severus set the pictures carefully down, then buried his face in his hands.

Monty woke up early on Christmas morning and headed for the Great Hall, still in his pajamas. Everyone agreed to open their presents together in the Great Hall, instead of alone in their dormitories. He had expected to see the professors there as well, but was pleasantly surprised to see only Harry and Luna, who was currently floating.

"Happy Christmas," Harry said with a smile.

Monty smiled back. It was only his second Christmas where he was allowed to celebrate. It was sort of an odd group, a fourth-year Slytherin and a first-year Ravenclaw he had just met. They'd probably not talk to each other if they weren't the only ones in the castle. But Harry and Luna were both nice, and it wasn't awkward at all. And he sort of knew Harry.

Monty had, from the beginning, been jealous of Ron having siblings. All he'd ever had was Dudley, and the less said about him the better. Monty didn't have any real idea what a family was meant to be like, other than watching the Dursleys interact, and he doubted they were the best example. He wished he had older brothers like Ron, someone who'd be on his side, who'd look out for him, someone to band against the Dursleys with.

Harry, he thought, would make a good brother.

The tree their presents were clustered under was massive, nearly reaching the ceiling. They were comically small next to it, and when Harry suggested they shrink it and move it next to one of the fires, Monty readily agreed. He also got to learn a new spell, *mobiliarbus*, which Harry explained literally meant *movable tree*. It was funny there was a spell specifically for

moving trees, and they theorized that whoever invented it must have had a lot of trees to move.

Monty felt bad he hadn't thought to get presents for either Harry or Luna. He'd just met Luna the day before, though, and he hadn't expected to get anything from either of them.

He was thus surprised when he received an emerald green quill from Luna, which she said was from quetzal. From Harry, he received a book called *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*.

"It's my copy," Harry explained. "So it's got a lot of my own notes in it. Some parts might be hard to read, but I think it's important for you to know."

"Thank you," Monty said, opening the book. Harry hadn't been lying when he said he'd added notes. The margins were crammed with them, in small, neat handwriting. There was an entire section dedicated to Voldemort. To his parents. To him.

He looked up at Harry, his throat feeling tight. "Thank you."

Hedwig brought him a toothpick and a rude note from the Dursleys. He chucked both in the fire.

Mostly Harmless

Chapter Summary

~ Christmas 1992

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry sat in the quiet of his dormitory, smiling at the presents he had received. His dad had given him *Mostly Harmless*, *The fifth book in the increasingly inaccurately named Hitchhikers Trilogy*. He hadn't even known another book was coming out, and it was a wonderful surprise. Astrid had sent him a ridiculous amount of gum, Harry having confided to her his impending orthodontic deliverance. Adrian had some sense and charmed the cover of the skin mag he sent to look like an issue of *Warlocks*. Harry still had no idea where he'd got it from.

The most perplexing gift was from Cedric. Harry hadn't anticipated receiving anything from him, especially in light of recent events. He had sent Harry a copy of *Flying with the Cannons*.

Harry understood Cedric's thought process. Harry liked reading. Harry had gone to a Cannons game. Therefore, Harry would like to read about the Cannons. It was a simple deduction, if obviously flawed. The most entertainment Harry expected out of it was his brother having received the same book from his friend Ron. Monty, for his part, looked somewhat mystified by it, but happy. Knowing something about Ron's family, Harry suspected it was Ron's own copy. It was the sort of thing a kid would do, giving someone a gift they themselves would like to receive. It was the thought that counted.

Cedric wasn't a twelve-year-old, though, and Harry wondered how much thought actually went into his choice. He didn't want to be ungrateful, but anyone who knew him would know he wasn't that interested in quidditch.

Harry put the book in his trunk. He would read it, on the off chance he would be questioned about it. If he skimmed it would only take a few hours. Then he could move onto something more interesting, like the issue of *The Quibbler* Luna had given him. He'd never even heard of it before.

Harry stood on the bastion of his stronghold, the cold wind blowing through his cloak, whistling through the gaps in his defensive walls. Luna and Monty had banded against him, a united front in their snowball battle.

Their first mistake was assuming they had a chance.

Harry narrowed his eyes, watching Monty and Luna trudge uphill. Monty had bewitched snowballs to pummel the wall. Luna had animated some snowpeople who lurched heavily, their heads slipping precariously on their snowy shoulders.

“Surrender!” Monty called out, snowballs hovering threateningly around him.

“Never!” Harry shouted back. “Freedom or death!”

“What should we do?” Monty asked Luna.

Hedwig flew past, crying out a challenge. They had visited the Owlery to invite her to fly with them later. Madam Hooch wasn’t around, but Harry could get the broomshed open for them.

“We should charge,” Luna said firmly. “For the nazzle mumphs!”

She pointed her wand and the snowpeople surged forward, throwing themselves at the walls. Harry ducked under a snowball that Monty threw at him.

“*Ablationivibus!*” he said, pointing his wand at one of the snowpeople. It exploded into a contained blizzard of fine snowflakes. Harry frowned at that, since it wasn’t quite what he was going for.

Monty and Luna started whispering to each other, and Harry immediately realized his mistake. He had used magic directly, and not snow. That changed the paradigm.

“*Cwica snawmann,*” Harry said, watching as snow coalesced into a bulbous, vaguely man-shaped stack. It was an old spell, a child’s spell, a demand for the world to act in the way he wanted. Monty gaped at the snow golem, and Harry felt a pang of sadness. If they had grown up with their parents, a magical snowball fight would be part of a normal childhood for them.

Harry couldn’t bring their mum back, but he could at least show Monty what it could have been like. He pointed his wand, and the battle recommenced.

Monty was having a wonderful Christmas. There was the snowball war, learning spells to enchant snowballs and make snowmen, digging trenches and conjuring water. Then Harry had unlocked the broomshed for them and they flew around with Hedwig. Harry had even found the quidditch supplies and got the snitch out. Hedwig was the best at finding it.

They visited Hagrid at his hut, softened treacle fudge by the fire while Fang whined since he couldn't have any. Then Luna had presented her ball of bones, and they went into the Forbidden Forest to visit the herd of thestrals. They were much bigger than he thought they would be, given his only point of reference was a toy. Hagrid told them how people thought thestrals were bad luck, and while they were admittedly somewhat startling to look at, Monty thought they were interesting. And very friendly. They loved the ball of bones.

Harry showed him and Luna drying charms and warming charms, and even managed to untangle twigs that had caught in Luna's long, fine hair. Still, being in the snow for hours was exhausting, and by afternoon Monty was more than ready to sit down for Christmas dinner.

It was a huge difference from Monty's first Christmas at Hogwarts. For one, everyone had gone home. It was just him, Harry, Luna, and some of their professors. The Great Hall was still grandly decorated, gigantic trees lining the walls, fairy lights with actual fairies, and the hall seemed to have arranged itself around them, making it feel more homey.

Seeing so much food never ceased to amaze Monty. Roast turkeys with glistening, crackling skin. Boiled potatoes, honey glazed carrots, peas swimming in butter, rosemary and thyme and creamy cloves of garlic, redcurrant jelly that shimmered like rubies in the warm candlelight, mouthwatering gravy in bird-shaped tureens.

The crackers were fantastic, loud as cannons, rainbow clouds of smoke, shooting streamers and showering them with shimmering confetti that slowly faded away. One of Monty's released several shrews, making Mrs. Norris twitch in her sleep. He got a clip-on compass for his broom, which seemed like it might come in handy, and a little figurine of an owl that glowed when he touched its beak. Luna got something that looked like a kaleidoscope, which she said she could see nargles with. Monty tried it, aiming it at one bunch of mistletoe, and saw what looked like a cloud of fireflies. It might have just been the kaleidoscope.

Monty had no idea what Harry had got. It was one of the oddest contraptions he had ever seen. It was made out of wood, he could tell that much, sort of shaped like an egg, with a wide bridge arcing across its top. There were decorative, S-shaped cutouts, a sort of stubby keyboard, several strings, and for some reason a crank at the bottom.

Harry initially seemed similarly baffled, but his eyes quickly lit up.

"What is it?" Luna asked, glancing from the contraption to Harry.

"It's a hurdy-gurdy," Harry said.

"A *what*?" Monty asked.

"A kind of instrument," Harry explained, picking it up carefully. "Phoebe—she's in Slytherin with me, Phoebe Alderton—she's in Frog Choir. They've got all sorts of instruments in the music room. She's mentioned seeing one before."

Harry settled it on his lap, and slowly moved the crank. The hurdy-gurdy made a low, droning sound. Harry pressed one of the keys, and the pitch changed.

“I have no idea how to play an instrument,” Harry said, staring at it. “My grandad had a guitar, but gran had to sell it when—”

Harry’s mouth snapped shut, and he looked frustrated with himself.

Monty exchanged looks with Luna. “I bet you’ll learn how really quickly,” he said.

Why didn’t Harry like talking about his family? Everyone had to know he was muggleborn now, since he’d been petrified.

Then Monty remembered. One of Harry’s parents had been killed by Voldemort. But if his parents were muggles, why would Voldemort kill them? He hadn’t had a chance to read the book he’d got yet, maybe Voldemort had killed a lot of muggles, or his followers had. Monty didn’t know.

“Try playing something,” Luna suggested. “A Christmas song!”

“I could try,” Harry said, glancing at their professors.

Professor McGonagall and Hagrid were deep in their cups, the eggnog overflowing. Professor Snape looked like he was getting a headache from their antics. The headmaster had a nest of chirping birds on his head, and was chatting happily to Filch, who’d put a bonnet and socks on Mrs. Norris. There was even one on her tail.

“I don’t think they’ll mind,” Monty said, smiling encouragingly. He had got a flute from Hagrid last Christmas and had never really tried it. The invisibility cloak, and the pictures of his mum, had taken all of his attention. Maybe he could learn an instrument too.

Luna hummed along as Harry attempted to play a song by trial and error. Monty watched the fish circling Harry’s head. When had it come back? Or had it ever left? Monty wanted to ask him about it.

“It sounds like the song of the narwhauroras,” Luna said, smiling. “Rainbow narwhals,” she explained to a confused Monty. “The unicorns of the sea. Daddy’s in the Arctic to get recordings.”

“*O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum,*” Harry sang softly, trying to match his playing, “*wie treu sind deine Blätter...*”

“Oh Christmas tree, oh Christmas tree!” Hagrid bellowed. Monty covered his mouth, laughing as McGonagall joined the singing.

Harry stopped playing, and Monty worried for a moment he had got embarrassed—he knew the best way to get someone to stop doing something was to make them ashamed of it—but Harry was looking up, a slight frown on his face. Monty followed his gaze and saw an owl flying towards them, carrying a bulky package.

“He must have flown all day,” Harry said, setting his hurdy-gurdy down. Monty saw it was a haughty-looking grey screech owl. The owl banked his wings, spiraling down to land silently

in front of Harry. Harry untied the package, then, in a move that confused Monty, asked the table for water and owl pellets. Amazingly, both appeared, and the owl settled down to eat.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” Monty said. “How does it work?”

“There are house-elves who work in the kitchens,” Harry explained, opening the letter that came with the package. “I was asking them. I can show you both where the kitchens are later, if you want.”

House-elves. Monty sat back. That explained so much. How the food was made, how it appeared, how their trunks got to their dormitories, who did all the cleaning. He had assumed it was magic, all things considered, but hadn’t thought about what *kind* of magic. Were the house-elves treated as poorly as Dobby? He couldn’t imagine anyone at Hogwarts hurting them, or making them hurt themselves.

“Helga Hufflepuff brought the house-elves to Hogwarts,” Harry continued. Monty blushed. Had his thoughts been so obvious? “She rescued them from bad homes.”

“Um, who’s that from?” Monty asked. “If you don’t mind me asking?”

Harry looked up and gave him a quick smile. “It’s from the Weasleys. It’s a get well letter, the entire family has signed it. It seems they’re all spending the holiday at their family home.”

“That’s good,” Monty said. He was worried about Ginny, though Ron didn’t seem that concerned. Monty didn’t know her that well, and found her behavior around him kind of off-putting. Same with Colin. At least Ginny didn’t try to take pictures of him all the time. Then Monty felt bad, because Ginny had been possessed, and Colin was still in hospital after being petrified. That camera had saved his life.

Harry opened the package and pulled out a black jumper.

“That’s one of Mrs. Weasley’s jumpers,” Monty said, recognizing the style. He’d got one too, in a green that matched his eyes. “She works really fast.”

“They really didn’t need to do anything,” Harry said, pulling out a large plum cake. He took out his wand and waved it over the cake, then smiled.

“What did you do?” Monty asked.

“Checked it for things I’m allergic to,” Harry said, setting the cake aside. “Peanuts and shellfish.”

“Why would there be shellfish in a pudding?” Luna asked.

“That’s a very good question,” Harry said, pulling on the jumper. It was a little big on him, but Mrs. Weasley probably didn’t know his size at all. “Oh, there’s something else.”

Underneath the cake there were two small books, which Harry picked up. A note slipped out of one, unnoticed by Harry. Monty picked it up, but was too polite to snoop.

“It’s *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, and *The Toadstool Tales* by Beatrix Bloxam,” Harry said.

Luna looked concerned. “Daddy won’t let me read that.”

“Why not?” Monty asked, handing the note to Harry.

“It makes people ill,” she said.

“It’s been banned by the Ministry,” Harry said quietly, glancing at their professors. “It induces vomiting in children.”

Monty wrinkled his nose. “Why would someone send you a book like that?”

Harry blushed faintly, then looked at the owl. “He probably thought I’d like it.”

Dear Mr. Evans,

I hope this epistle finds you well.

Your efforts were critical in eliminating the threat against Hogwarts, and the attack on your person was the catalyst to freeing my sister from possession. Words fail to encapsulate the depth of our family’s gratitude.

*While my mother has taken it upon herself to show her appreciation via knitwear and pudding, I have retrieved this publication from our library. To be honest, no one wants to read it, and in fact we are not allowed to. It was more of a curiosity. We have discussed *The Toadstool Tales in Muggle Studies* as part of our comparative literature unit. Muggle fairy tales are quite inventive, aren’t they?*

The Toadstool Tales can also be seen as identical to the sanitization of muggle history in magical literature. As you know, many of us are as ignorant of events in the muggle world as muggles are of ours. They are often downplayed, when they are mentioned at all. Recall my, in retrospect, ignominious surprise at learning how many muggles perished in the Second World War.

That being said, I hope you enjoy these two books. I understand that, raised outside of the magical world, you may not be familiar with the stories we tell our children. Our allegories, and the morals we learn from them, diverge in interesting ways.

Congratulations on your depetrification. I wish you an expedient recovery.

Happy Christmas,

Prefect Weasley

Harry laid back on his bed after reading Percy's letter again, then covered his face with a pillow. He was such an idiot.

After breakfast on Boxing Day, Harry led his brother and Luna to the kitchens. They walked down the steps to the basement, on the opposite side of the grand staircase from the main entrance to the dungeons. It took a while to get down the corridor as Luna wanted to look at every portrait. Most depicted dishes they were served at meals, and even smelled like them.

"The Hufflepuff Basement is that way," he said, pointing to the stack of barrels at the end of the corridor. "We can try getting in later, if either of you are interested."

"I'd like to see the other common rooms," Luna said.

"Me too," Monty said.

Harry shrugged. "Why not? I've always been curious." He stopped in front of the painting of the fruit bowl. "The entrance to the kitchens is through here. You've got to tickle the pear."

He did so, and the pear giggled, turning into a door knob. He looked over at Monty and Luna, and smiled at the astonishment on their faces.

"Don't spread it around," he said. "I'm sure everyone in Hufflepuff knows, but we don't want to take advantage of the house-elves. They *really* don't know any better."

Soon they were in the cavernous kitchens, approached by multiple elves eager to serve them. Luna bore this attention gracefully, likely having had some experience with house-elves. Monty was unnerved by the servility, the desperation to please in their big, bulging eyes.

"Could you give us a tour of the kitchens?" Harry asked one who had started tugging anxiously on her ears.

"Flopsy can do that!" she said, smiling brightly. "This way, misters and miss!"

Since Madam Pince had gone to France the library was closed, unless they got one of the professors to supervise them. Rather, that would be the case if they could find anyone. As far as Harry could tell, his dad and McGonagall were holed up in the headmaster's office. Filch was to be avoided as he was still furious about what had happened to Mrs. Norris and devoted to her recovery. Hagrid spent the majority of his time outdoors, tending to the various creatures that called Hogwarts home. He wasn't always easy to find.

Harry was on his way back to the Slytherin Dungeon, thinking about breaking into the library, when he felt the strangest sensation. His skin crawled, as if icy fingers were trailing down him. He thought for a moment he might have walked through a ghost without realizing. He had been leading Monty and Luna in an expedition through the castle, showing them the shortcuts and secret passages he knew of and uncovering others. When the bell for curfew rang, Sir Nicholas and the Grey Lady had arrived to take Monty and Luna back to their common rooms. The Bloody Baron absented himself from babysitting duties, presumably thinking a fourth-year was old enough to make it to his common room without diversions. Perhaps the Baron was checking on him?

There was a slight scuffing sound, and Harry almost missed a step when he understood what was going on. He continued walking through the dungeon as if nothing had happened. He *had* suggested they visit each other's common rooms, though they hadn't got around to it in the few days since Christmas. Hogwarts was a very big castle, and they only saw a small part of it on a daily basis. Harry had a hypothesis that Hogwarts was meant to be able to house the entire magical population of Britain and Ireland, in the event the muggles tried to burn them at the stake again. It was simply too large to otherwise justify, given the few hundred students.

Harry slowed when he reached the blank stretch of wall that hid his common room. Shaking his head, he said the password.

"Pureblood."

He sighed as the door slid open. "It was someone's idea of an inside joke," he said to the air, knowing his brother was listening. "A way to make light of how we've been treated lately. Like criminals. Slytherin has more purebloods than other houses, but there still aren't that many. Most people are halfblood, though after a few generations of only mixing with other witches or wizards, they'll call themselves purebloods. The magical gene pool is too shallow to *not* marry muggleborns, or even muggles. If your blood is a little too pure, you end up like Crabbe and Goyle."

Having been caught, Monty took off his cloak. "I thought they were just thick."

"Crabbe is actually nice if you can get him away from Malfoy," Harry said. "A little slow, but it isn't his fault his family's been marrying their cousins for centuries."

Monty made a face of disgust. "I guess not."

"So," Harry said, stepping further into the room. "What do you think?"

Monty looked around, the invisibility cloak still draped over his shoulders. "It's really... green."

Harry snorted. "It is. And there are a lot of snakes."

Monty nodded. "It's not that different from Gryffindor, except we've got windows."

"We've got windows too," Harry said. "Come on, I'll show you."

Harry walked to his dormitory, Monty trailing behind him, head swiveling as he took in the Slytherin Dungeon.

Harry had misgivings about spending time with his brother. In a few short days the other students would return and they'd be back in classes. How could he explain away being on a first name basis with the Boy Who Lived? Luna was somewhat eccentric, even for a witch, and her greeting him in the corridors would be less noteworthy.

Harry wanted to be friends with Monty. He wanted to spend time with his brother. If he suddenly became aloof and detached, pretending Monty was just another student to him, it would hurt Monty's feelings. It was a difficult situation, all around.

"Whoa," Monty said as they entered Harry's dormitory. Harry smiled as his brother hurried to the large window looking into the Black Lake. "It's like having an aquarium!"

"It is," Harry agreed. "We see all sorts of creatures. Grindylows, kelpies and nuggles, nixies, plimpies. Sometimes one of the merfolk or the Giant Squid will swim by."

Monty turned back to share the delight with him, but his eyes caught on something above Harry's head.

"I was wondering," Monty said, looking a bit uncertain, "why didn't you have your fish in Diagon Alley?"

Harry sat down on his bed and sighed. "I lied about Frankie going away because I don't want people to know I still have her. That didn't work out well since the disillusionment dropped when I was petrified. I'll probably hide her again soon, definitely before summer since I live in the muggle world."

Monty frowned, but nodded in understanding. "Wait. Does that mean you could hear the voice too?"

"I could," Harry admitted. "That's how I worked out it was a basilisk. That, and you being a parselmouth."

Monty looked conflicted. "Why not just say that, then?"

Harry didn't know what to say. There was so much he wanted to say. "I have a lot of secrets. And some of those are reasons why it isn't a good idea for us to be friends."

Monty's face fell. "Is it because of what happened to your parents? With Voldemort?"

Harry hesitated, then said, “Yes. I’m sorry, Monty. I would like to be friends, but it isn’t safe, for either of us. I don’t know if your friend Ron told you, but that diary his sister got hold of belonged to Voldemort. He’s still out there.”

“Yeah,” Monty said, sitting down across from him, on Cassius’ bed. Cassius hated people touching his things, but he wasn’t around to complain. “When I first met him Hagrid said Voldemort wasn’t really gone, but he’d lost all his powers.”

Harry doubted that. Voldemort still had power. Even his name had power. “You remember what happened to Quirrell last year?”

“Yeah?”

“He was being possessed by Voldemort,” Harry said. Monty’s jaw dropped. “I know, right? Quirrell tried to...he attacked me, and when his spell backfired, I saw Voldemort’s wraith. He spoke to me. The headmaster didn’t want me to go around telling people, but I think you ought to know.”

“So he might be after you too?” Monty asked.

Harry sincerely hoped Voldemort wasn’t. “You know something about the war now, right?”

Monty nodded. “I’ve been reading that book you got me.”

Harry smiled. “That’s good. Then you know that there were really only two sides of the war. People who supported Voldemort, and people who fought against him. Everyone else only got in the way.”

“Was that what your parents were?” Monty asked. “In the way?”

Harry looked down, somewhat wishing the conversation hadn’t started at all. “Not quite. One of my parents was a Death Eater.”

Monty’s eyes grew as big as saucers. “Is that the one who died? Did they betray Voldemort?”

Harry shook his head. “I really don’t want to go into details. But there are others who have parents who were Death Eaters. That might be part of the reason why people like Draco Malfoy are so hostile to you. His father lost a lot of status after the war. He was on the losing side.”

“But you’re not...hostile,” Monty pointed out. “Wait. If one of your parents was a Death Eater, how come you’re a muggleborn?”

Harry grimaced. “I’m not. That’s another secret, by the way, though I may as well be since I *was* raised by muggles.”

“You’re like me, then,” Monty concluded, smiling again.

Harry wished his brother was a little less insightful. “I am. Anyway, I hope you understand why it would be complicated for you to be friends with someone like me.”

“Not really,” Monty said. “Who cares who your parents were?”

“Well, blood purists, for one,” Harry said with a thin smile. “It matters a lot to some people. Besides that, you’re very famous. If you suddenly start hanging around a Slytherin, people will start asking questions. You know, people thought I’d cursed Cedric to force him to be my friend.”

“You wouldn’t do that,” Monty said, offended. “That’s stupid.”

Harry shrugged. “Slytherin has a bad reputation.”

Monty shifted around. “I...understand your reasoning. I think. I don’t like it, though. But,” he said, pulling out his invisibility cloak again, “we can be friends like this, right?”

Harry smiled, even though he felt terrible. He could see the headlines now. *Boy Who Lived Has Older Brother in Slytherin. Boy Who Lived’s Half Brother Has Death Eater Father. Lily Potter: Heroine or Harlot?*

“We can,” Harry said. What else could he say? “You could send letters, too. Don’t use Hedwig, though, she’s too distinctive. At least while we’re in school.”

Monty nodded eagerly. “By the way, how did you know I was following you?”

“I heard you walking,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “You need to get better at sneaking around. Do you want to learn some silencing charms?”

“Yeah!”

Chapter End Notes

I spent a considerable amount of time thinking about instruments. The following were rejected for various reasons: bass, tin whistle, viola, melodica, clàrsach, ocarina,

hammered dulcimer, bodhrán, bagpipes, crwth, sistrum. I was really on the fence about the hammered dulcimer.

The comments last chapter blew me away, thank you so much!

Special Services

Chapter Summary

January 1993

They were looking for the impossible.

“There is no universal defense to the dark arts,” Severus said, for what felt like the millionth time.

They had spent days discussing various means by which Hogwarts could be infiltrated by the Dark Lord. Possession of a willing host, such as Quirrell. Possession via an artifact, as with the Weasley chit. Those plots having been uncovered made repeat occurrences unlikely. The Dark Lord was unpredictable, both due to his genius and his insanity. There was no telling what his next approach would be. Unless they put Hogwarts in a protective bubble, completely shutting out the outside world...and even then, sufficient force would be able to penetrate it. How could they prepare for anything and everything?

“I am perfectly aware of that, Severus,” Dumbledore said. “I did teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, you know.”

Severus stared blankly at the man, who smiled blandly back. That, in Dumbledore’s mind, was his greatest accomplishment. Not defeating Grindelwald, but being a teacher. How touching.

“We can have the house-elves check belongings when they get off the train,” Severus suggested, at his wit’s end.

Dumbledore shook his head. It came off as patronizing, though Severus imagined the headmaster thought he was being fatherly.

“A house-elf would not have recognized the diary for what it was,” Dumbledore said. “Nor many witches or wizards, for that matter. I won’t mention matters of privacy, we have already agreed compromises must be made in the interest of safety. However, a student might keep a dark artifact on their person, or have it delivered via owl, or...”

Severus scowled as the headmaster rambled on. His previous suggestion had been to install a Thief’s Downfall at the entrance, but it was goblin magic and goblins were not inclined to help witches and wizards given how appallingly they had been treated over the millenia. And the Thief’s Downfall was easily circumvented by going around or under it, or using shield charms, or untraceable charms, or any number of workarounds.

That was one aspect of the dark arts, and defense against them which went hand in hand, that made them so fascinating. It was an ever escalating series of action and reaction. For example, the more dark detectors improved, the more sophisticated the techniques to subvert them became. *No vestige of beginning, no prospect of an end.*

Severus knew it was a quote from something, he just couldn't recall what. He'd heard it in one of the more abrasive songs Harry listened to. Maybe Burbage would know, she was steeped in muggle culture. Shame she had left for the remainder of holiday, she was a good buffer between Severus and the rest of the staff.

"Where is McGonagall?" he asked once Dumbledore had wound down. "Shouldn't she be here as well? This does involve her students."

"She's in the library with the children," the headmaster said. "Which reminds me, we've decided on a punishment for Ginny Weasley. Minerva and I believe you will find it satisfactory."

"I doubt that," Severus said flatly. They knew who was truly behind the Chamber incident. The true Heir of Slytherin, the Dark Lord. More immediately, Lucius Malfoy was the one who planted the diary among Weasley's books. Severus had entertained the idea of Arthur Weasley excoriating Lucius in the *Daily Prophet*, but Dumbledore didn't want word of the diary getting out. They still didn't know what it was, nor did they want Ginny Weasley's experience to be used as a tool for Arthur to wield against his longtime rival. As McGonagall had put it, the girl had already gone through enough. Severus doubted Molly Weasley would tolerate her only daughter being a punching bag for the media.

Dumbledore chuckled fondly. "Always such a pessimist, Severus. You haven't even heard my idea!"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Do tell."

Harry sat at the Slytherin table, waiting for the students to arrive for the start-of-term feast. Luna was at the Ravenclaw table, sitting within arm's reach of him and humming happily to herself. Monty was at the Gryffindor table, shooting them looks.

Harry nodded to his brother. The past week with Monty and Luna had a dream-like quality to it, melancholic in that Harry doubted he'd ever have an opportunity like it again. At least Luna got something more out of it, she seemed content enough and didn't have any of the complications Harry did.

Soon he heard the doors to the entrance hall open, the tread of hundreds of feet, the excited chatter. Harry had no idea where to look. At the head table his dad had his perennially bored expression while Professor Burbage laughed to herself. He shivered as the doors to the Great

Hall opened, deciding he should just stay calm and act like nothing had happened. Harry was quickly disabused of that notion when someone gave an eardrum shattering scream.

“Harry!”

He looked up and saw Astrid sprinting at him. He stood up hastily just as she collided with him.

“You’re alive!” she shouted.

“I owled you,” Harry wheezed, his ribs creaking. Phoebe had gone the whole hog and fainted, or pretended to, and was being dragged over by an aggrieved Jasmine.

“Cassius, what’s the word?” Astrid demanded, shaking Harry around.

“Exonerated,” Cassius supplied, nodding to Harry. “Good to see you among the living.”

“I was always living,” Harry said, still in Astrid’s clutches.

“Vindicated!” Astrid said. “Now who’s eating crow, bunch of wankers!”

“Exculpated,” Jasmine said, dropping Phoebe onto a bench. “Astrid, darling, you’re killing him.”

“Let the man breathe,” Adrian said, ruffling Harry’s hair. Harry scowled at him.

“Get off of him, you twat!” Astrid growled.

“It’s good to see you again, Harry,” Jasmine said, squeezing him briefly.

Phoebe woke up with a gasp. “Where am I?”

“The Great Hall,” Terence said. He clapped Harry on the shoulder. “Gave us a scare, mate.”

“Next time a basilisk breaks into the loo, I’ll keep my eyes shut,” he said, sitting down as McGonagall called for order.

“So what did you do over holiday?” Astrid asked. “Besides your little ice lolly routine?”

Harry opened his mouth to object to the word *little*, but the headmaster stood to address them.

“Welcome back, everyone,” Dumbledore said. “As you no doubt have noticed, Mr. Evans has recovered from his petrification, thanks to both his efforts in identifying the basilisk, and to the hard work of Professor Sprout, Madam Pomfrey, and Professor Snape.”

Harry sat rigidly as everyone clapped. He had learned from his dad what exactly had been done. He had invented a new potion for mandrakes to make them grow faster. In the course of a day. It was absurdly impressive, and made Harry feel...cared for.

Harry disagreed with the claim he had recovered, and noticed the headmaster hadn't mentioned Colin Creevey's continued hospitalization. He had trouble falling asleep, panicking when he felt his body relaxing, to the point where he needed a sleeping potion to get any rest. And there was the fear he wouldn't wake up after taking a potion, even though he trusted his dad, and Madam Pomfrey. He'd taken sleeping potions before and had been perfectly fine. Now it felt like he was losing control of his body. He'd wake up feeling like he was still petrified, unable to move, heart beating frantically until he remembered where he was and that the basilisk was dead. They had shown him its head, the phoenix-clawed eyes. His dreams were filled with confusing, garbled images. He slept with his wand.

"I must ask you all to respect the privacy of your fellow students, and to not go asking them questions about their experiences," the headmaster said.

"Fat chance of that," Adrian muttered. "Pretty boy's about to break his neck."

Harry looked over to the Hufflepuff table and saw Cedric watching him. He gave him a small smile, then looked back at the headmaster. Unfortunately, the old man was done talking, but then food began to appear which was a welcome distraction.

"Harry, do you have any brown sauce?" Luna asked, leaning precariously across the aisle.

"You haven't got any at your table?" he asked, glancing over. Luna was sitting among the upper year Ravenclaws, who didn't seem to know what to make of her. "Pass it down, would you, Terence?"

Terence looked perplexed, but handed him the bowl, which Harry gave to Luna.

"Thank you, Harry."

"You're welcome, Luna."

Astrid was staring at him.

"What?" he asked, turning back to his food. "The library was closed."

"We broke into the library," Luna helpfully added. "But one of the portraits inside told on us and then Professor McGonagall said we had to get her if we wanted to use the library."

"Thank you, Luna," Harry said drily.

"You adopted a Ravenclaw," Astrid whispered.

Harry shrugged. "Luna's a friend."

Harry had debated saying anything at all, but over the holiday he came to understand friendship meant a great deal to Luna. If his friends got a laugh out of it, so what?

What he didn't want was for them to start asking questions about Monty. It wouldn't have gone unnoticed that he'd stayed at Hogwarts too. Harry knew just the thing to redirect the conversation.

“So,” he said casually, “quidditch.”

The misdirect didn't work quite as well as Harry had hoped, considering the knowing looks he got from his friends, but they went along with it. There was a tentative plan forming to get Astrid and Terence to play in the upcoming match against Ravenclaw. Cassius was more lukewarm about his role on the team, contributing little to what he deemed *rank stupidity*.

As the feast ended, and they began leaving the Great Hall for one last night of freedom in their common rooms, Harry found himself being pulled aside by Cedric. They both got a lot of looks, but Cedric had a determined set to his jaw as he led Harry down a side corridor.

“Hi,” Cedric said once they were alone.

“Hi,” Harry replied. He didn't know what to do about Cedric anymore. Cedric was nice. He was charming, attractive, considerate. But increasingly Harry felt he was something of a novelty to Cedric.

“I'm glad you're okay,” Cedric said, smiling at him. “I was really worried.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, looking to the side. “Thanks for the gift, by the way. I'm sorry I didn't get you anything. I was petrified.”

Suddenly Harry was being hugged. He reached up his arms tentatively and patted Cedric on the back, overwhelmed by the sudden proximity of another boy.

“I'm so sorry, Harry,” Cedric said, mumbling into his hair. “I should have stood up for you better. I was so upset when you were attacked. Everyone was so wrong about you, and it was the worst possible way to learn. Your friend, Urquhart? She yelled at the entire Great Hall. I should have said something too.”

“Astrid's got a pretty big pair,” Harry said, smiling at the thought. He wished he had been there for it.

Cedric laughed, then loosened his hold so he could look at Harry.

“It was amazing you figured it all out,” Cedric said ardently. “It makes sense that a Slytherin would know what kind of monster that old goat had.”

Harry took a moment to manage his initial reaction to that. “Anyone could have worked it out. I'm sure the professors would have eventually.”

“Yeah, but *you* did,” Cedric said, radiating pride. “Harry, I was thinking, would you—”

“What are you two doing?”

Harry froze, blood rushing to his face. Cedric jumped back with a sheepish grimace. Harry looked over to see a livid Percy, standing next to an affronted Penelope Clearwater.

“We were just talking,” Cedric said hurriedly. “Right, Harry?”

“Right,” Harry said, positively mortified. Why did it have to be Percy, of all prefects, and Penelope bloody Clearwater?

“The feast is over,” Percy said acerbically. “Get back to your common rooms.”

“Come on, Harry,” Cedric said, taking his hand to pull him along. They hurried past the two prefects, heads down. As they turned a corner, Harry caught a few muttered words.

“Goodness me,” Penelope said. “Some people have no shame.”

He glanced back and saw Percy watching him, the tips of his ears bright red.

The first week back went about as well as Harry could expect. People were still staring and whispering, though their faces were more ashamed than malevolent when they were caught at it. He would have preferred to ignore them, to have his involvement swept under the rug, but the headmaster had taken it out of his hands. It made him wonder who had spread the story of his little brother’s survival.

Their mum and Monty’s dad had been killed before Voldemort turned his wand on Monty, supposedly. The only witness was Monty himself, and he had been far too young to remember. At least, Harry hoped he didn’t, for Monty’s sake. Who had found Monty afterwards? How did they know the Killing Curse had been used? Who had given his brother to the Dursleys? How did the magical public find out? It was a strange, unexplained part of that night.

The simplest answer was a man last seen wearing meadow-green robes covered in jewel-toned butterflies that flapped their wings when he moved.

Harry sat on his bed on Friday evening, playing with his hurdy-gurdy. Phoebe had smuggled some books out of the music room for him, which he had spread about him as he messed around. There was even a manual on frankly daunting instrument maintenance, things he had to do before he even played the thing. Thankfully, magic, as it often did, made things easier.

“Where did you even get that thing?” Adrian asked, covering his ears.

“Out of a cracker,” Harry said, relentlessly turning the crank. It was quite meditative.

Terence looked up from his bed, where he was despondently playing with a practice snitch. “You get the strangest things out of those.”

“Right?” Harry said, trying to play a scale. One of the notes sounded off, so he moved it up a half step.

Harry had disillusioned Frankie again, though he knew his friends knew she was still swimming around since they’d seen him petrified. He didn’t think they would tell anyone. He

had thought about the odd generosity of wizard crackers, given the ones he had grown up with usually had paper hats, plastic trinkets, and naff jokes. There was other magic at work, or maybe he was just lucky.

The door to their dormitory slammed open.

“Evans!” Astrid barked. “Snape wants you!!”

Adrian gave an amazing shriek and dove onto his bed.

“Idiot,” Astrid said. “Come on, Haz. He’s in a foul mood.”

Harry set his hurdy-gurdy aside, making a note to ask Phoebe if it had a less silly name.

“What’s he want?” Harry asked as he followed Astrid into the common room.

“Who knows,” she said. “I ran into him coming back from the pitch and he told me to get you.”

“What were you doing out there?” Harry asked.

“Spying on Ravenclaw, what else?” she said, smirking. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” he said, stepping out into the corridor. His dad was there, and Astrid was right. He was fuming.

“Follow me, Evans,” his dad said, walking quickly down the corridor. “The headmaster wishes to see you in his office.”

“What for, sir?” Harry asked, trying to match his dad’s pace. He had grown a few inches taller, which was a pleasant surprise, but he doubted he would reach his dad’s height. His mum hadn’t been a tall woman. He hoped he’d end up somewhere in the middle.

“You are aware that Ginny Weasley has been allowed back in Hogwarts?” his dad said, his tone indicating he disagreed with the decision.

“I am,” Harry said. He’d spotted Ginny a few times, but the girl kept her head down and hid herself among the other firsties. He had guessed that keeping her out of school would have all but identified her as the culprit, unless her family feigned a sickness. It seemed off that someone who’d been possessed by Voldemort, a teenage version of him if his dad’s information had been correct, would be able to go back to school like everything was fine. It had only been a few weeks.

“Part of her punishment,” his dad said with faint sneer, “is apologizing to her victims.”

Harry crossed his arms as they mounted the grand staircase. “I don’t want a coached apology,” he said. “I don’t really blame her. Maybe a little,” he amended. “Is that all? An apology?”

His dad snorted. "There aren't many privileges we can strip from her, and taking points would be equally useless. She'll be serving detention for the remainder of the year, and will be barred from joining the quidditch team. It seems the girl is an avid player."

Harry looked up at his dad. They had reached the gargoyle. "That's..."

His dad smiled unpleasantly. "It's a consequence for McGonagall too, for not monitoring the welfare of her students. Midget gems."

Harry was confused for a moment, then the gargoyle leapt to the side. "Is it always a muggle sweet?"

"You've cracked the headmaster's onerous code," his dad said dully. He glanced at Harry. "Sometimes it's a magical sweet."

Inside of the headmaster's office a small crowd waited for them. There was Ginevra Weasley, standing between her parents, who bolstered the girl with their presence alone. Professor McGonagall was next to a genial Dumbledore, her expression a contrast to the headmaster's own.

"Ah, Severus, Harry, welcome," Dumbledore said. So he was *Harry* now. Interesting. "I believe we are all gathered."

Harry had felt some trepidation during the walk, not at meeting the Weasleys but at the possibility that Percy would be there too. Since he and Cedric had been caught doing absolutely nothing, he'd only spotted Percy a few times around school, usually at meals. He avoided looking at the Gryffindor table, not wanting to give Monty false hope. Monty himself had taken their conversation to heart, and hadn't tried seeking Harry out. Harry had intimated that he spent a lot of time in the library, so perhaps he'd see Monty there.

"Now," Dumbledore said. "I believe Ginny has something to say."

Harry looked at Ginny. She nodded, a resolute expression on her face, and pulled out a roll of parchment. He glanced at his dad, whose face had gone impressively blank.

"Dear Harry," Ginny began. She paused, then looked up at him. "Is it okay if I call you Harry?"

"It's fine," Harry said, smiling a little.

This seemed to give Ginny courage. She squared her shoulders and pressed on.

"Dear Harry," she repeated. "I'm sorry that you were petrified. I was really nervous about starting at Hogwarts. I've been looking forward to it ever since my brother Bill started. And my...my other brothers like to tease me a lot. So I was really nervous, and I thought that writing in a diary might help. Then the diary started writing back. I should have known better, but it was like having a friend. I thought he *was* my friend," she said, tearing up. "Tom...he was really nice, and he acted like he understood me. I now know that it was You-Know-Who all along, and that he is very good at manipulating people." Ginny wiped her

eyes. “He made me feel so confused, and made me doubt myself. I should have talked to someone about it, but I thought they would just make fun of me again. I’m sorry that I wasn’t brave enough to stop it.”

She lowered her shaking arms, then looked up at him.

Harry took a moment to compose his response.

“I accept your apology,” he said formally, watching as Ginny relaxed, her parents supporting her.

There were many other things Harry could have said, but he chose not to. He didn’t think he’d be getting over anything any time soon, though.

“I’m also sorry everyone blamed you,” Ginny added. “That was really mean of them.”

Harry strongly suspected that Ginny had told the diary about it, and that was why the basilisk had come for him next. To eliminate the pretender to the throne.

He shrugged, not wanting to pile on the guilt. “*Plus ça change*. It makes sense that the Heir of Slytherin would be from Slytherin.” He looked at Mrs. Weasley, who seemed happy with the way things had turned out. “Thank you for the Christmas package, by the way. It was very thoughtful.”

Mrs. Weasley smiled warmly at him. “Of course, dear. It was no trouble at all! It’s the least I could do for all you’ve been through.”

“And everything you’ve done for us,” Mr. Weasley added. “Who knows how long things would have gone on without your help.”

“It was nothing,” Harry said.

“It wasn’t,” his dad said. Harry looked up at him, but his dad was looking impassively at the Weasleys. “Very few people would be able to keep their wits about them with a fifty-foot murderous basilisk right behind them.”

Ginny blanched at this description. McGonagall had a pinched look, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were both at a loss for words.

“Thank you, Severus,” Dumbledore said, drawing everyone’s attention. “On that note, Harry will be receiving a Special Award for Services to the School. I’ll be making the announcement to the school tomorrow morning.”

Harry stared at the headmaster, numb with shock as the others in the room congratulated him. Ginny broke free from her parents and threw her arms around him, sobbing and mumbling more apologies. Harry patted her back, lost in thought. Services to the School. It’d have his name engraved on it.

He hoped his mum would have been proud.

Milk Substitutes

Chapter Summary

January 1993

Charity Lament, seventh-year Slytherin prefect, Slytherin Gobstones Captain, madwoman, paced back and forth before her team, a pair of gobstones clacking ominously as she rolled them in one hand.

Harry ran his tongue over his newly freed teeth. He only had to wear his retainers at night now. It was so odd not having anything in his mouth. It felt like there was too much space in there.

“This is my year,” Charity said, looking over their team with a gimlet eye. Harry rolled his own eyes, smiling to take the edge of Charity’s intensity. Ethan Harper and Bridget Pritchard, their newest teammates, looked like they were having second thoughts. It was far too late for them.

“Our year,” Harry said.

“My team will take the cup,” Charity said, pausing in front of Tracey Davis, who met Charity’s crazed eyes fearlessly. She’d been through this before, a grizzled, pigtailed veteran.

“Our team will take the trophy,” Harry said. “We’ve got a lot of good players.”

“I have the *best* players Hogwarts has ever seen since Captain Eileen Prince,” Charity said, pointing to the restored altar. Harry had been nominated to approach Professor Snape about getting their practice room back. It was more of a practice *lair*. Harry hadn’t known how much gobstones paraphernalia there was in the world. Gobstone racks, cases, display stands, magazines, banners, pennants, plush toys, mobiles, self-gobbing stones, night lights, duvet covers, throw pillows, targets, board games. Given gobstones was essentially a board game, the last was most puzzling.

There were puzzles, too.

“We have three months until the tournament begins,” Charity said.

“Five months until NEWTs,” Harry said.

“Which is why we are starting now,” Charity said, glaring at him. “Avery.”

Killian jumped. “Yeah?”

“You’re training Davis. Crabbe, I’m taking you under my wing. Pritchard, Harper, you’re with Evans. He’s the team ace, you can learn a lot from—”

There was a knock at the door.

“I’ll get it,” Harry said, but before he could, the door opened. Luna skipped in.

“Hi, Harry!”

“Hey, Luna,” Harry said. “We’re doing gobstones training right now.”

“I know,” Luna said. “I just wanted to tell you I joined the Ravenclaw team!”

There was a loud *crack*, and Harry looked back to see dust falling through Charity’s fingers.

He cleared his throat and turned back to Luna. “Then we shall see you on the battlefield.”

Luna nodded firmly, waved at her fellow firsties, then skipped away.

They all stared at the empty doorway.

“*Collodiabolus*.”

The door slammed shut, the knob flickering with malignant black flames.

Charity put her wand away, then brushed crushed bits of gobstone from her hands.

“Where were we?”

Astrid’s gift of gum was a lifesaver. She hadn’t sent only magically-enhanced gum, but had braved the streets of muggle Aberdeen to get more mundane flavors. Simple gum that wouldn’t bring Madam Pince’s wrath down on him as he chewed it in the library. Astrid had torn the labeling off one bright orange variety and challenged him to guess the flavor. So far it was better than the clove one.

Gum was liberating.

Harry turned the page of his book, frowned, and scribbled a note on his parchment

“Sorry I’m late,” Cedric said, sitting down heavily across from him. “One of the nifflers got away and broke into the hippogriff stable. Took ages to get all the tack out of its pouch.”

Harry smiled. “That sounds fun. I kind of wish I took Care.”

Cedric smiled warmly back. “It would have been nice to be in classes with you. What are you working on?”

“Defense essay,” he said unhappily. “I can’t believe we’re still on household pests.”

“Didn’t you say that was the only book of his that was halfway accurate?” Cedric asked slyly.

“I did,” Harry said, pleased Cedric had remembered that.

“You look really nice,” Cedric said, surprising him.

“What?”

“I mean, you have a pretty smile,” Cedric said, blushing faintly.

Harry stopped chewing his gum. “Thank you.”

“So, are you looking forward to the match?” Cedric asked, taking out his own books. “Slytherin versus Ravenclaw, right?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, thinking it was about time he clarified some things. “Actually, I—”

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Cedric said, setting his books down. “Did you read the book I sent? I know it’s only been a few weeks, but you’re a fast reader.”

“I did,” Harry admitted.

“I still can’t believe that game in 1931,” Cedric said. “Do you think the curse is real?”

“I think it bears investigating,” Harry hedged. “Listen, Cedric. To be honest, I’m not really a fan of quidditch.”

“Oh,” Cedric said, deflating. “Was it boring then? I’m sorry, I thought...”

“I liked it,” Harry said, which wasn’t entirely dishonest. He certainly knew more about the Chudley Cannons than he had ever wanted to.

“Do you like any sports at all?” Cedric asked earnestly. “What about flying?”

“Flying’s alright, I suppose,” Harry said. “I, well...I like skateboarding. I don’t think I’ve talked about it before. It’s a muggle thing, you know.”

“Guess the kneazle’s out of the bag with that one,” Cedric said good-naturedly. “It makes sense you’d like a muggle sport, though, since you’re muggleborn. There’s some muggleborns in Hufflepuff who go on about football all the time.”

Harry nodded, though he wanted to object. Not everything came down to him being raised by muggles, or being in Slytherin. They could deal with that later, though.

“And I’ve got other friends I can talk about quidditch with,” Cedric continued. “We could talk about other things. Well,” he added, glancing at Harry’s parchment, “maybe when we’re done with homework.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, relieved. “I could show you sometime? I’ve brought my skateboard with me, and I practice in the dungeons.”

Cedric beamed at him, and Harry started chewing his gum again.

“The Wizengamot’s back in session,” Cassius announced dispassionately over breakfast.

“Who gives a shit about that?” Astrid hissed.

“Harry, for one,” Cassius said, shaking out his *Daily Prophet*. Harry caught his copy as it fell towards him, using it as a cover to empty the contents of a small bottle into their pitcher of milk. He picked the pitcher up as if to use it.

“We’ve got bigger fish to fry than some ponce politicians,” she said. “It’s quidditch today.”

“Yes, we know,” Jasmine said, moving a butter dish out of the way so Phoebe didn’t stick her elbow in it. “It’s the only thing you’ve been talking about all month.”

“You sure you’re not in, Cas?” Adrian asked, glancing down the table where the main team was clustered together.

“If Snape catches us, we’re dead,” Terence said. “Of course he’s not in. He wants a clean record.”

“Even Harry’s been in detention,” Astrid said dismissively. “It’s *detention*, not a death sentence.”

“Unless it’s with Filch,” Adrian said. “I heard the Weasley twins scared Mrs. Norris with a rubber snake. Filch said he’d march them out to the Forbidden Forest and birch them.”

“Haz,” Astrid whispered urgently. “Now!”

“*Permutolacte*,” he said, looking at the pitcher sitting between Draco Malfoy and Miles Bletchley. It sat there innocently.

“Did it work?” Astrid asked, watching him intently

“We’ll find out in an hour.”

Cassius shook his head, turning a page. “Would you look at that? The Minister’s nephew vanished an entire muggle train.”

Adrian cackled, and Harry hurriedly opened his *Prophet* to the article.

“He works for the Improper Use of Magic Office,” he said, looking over to the Gryffindor table. He saw Monty with his friends, and was pleased to see Luna sitting next to him, happily eating toast. He looked further along the table, where Percy had his own copy of the *Prophet*, reading it with a humorless expression. Harry looked back to the article.

Scandal hit the Improper Use of Magic Office yesterday, as an enquiry was launched into the mysterious disappearance of a Muggle ‘tube train’ on Friday evening.

“Seems it happens all the time,” an anonymous Ministry official tells this reporter. “Took the muggles an hour and a half to realize the train had vanished into thin air.”

As of publication, Rufus Fortinbras Fudge has been suspended from his position. The public wants to know, is the Ministry genuinely committed to eradicating anti-muggle bias within its ranks?

“Stop laughing,” Phoebe said, reaching over to flick Adrian on the forehead. “People could have died!”

Adrian rubbed his head and opened his mouth to retort.

“And don’t say it doesn’t matter because they’re just muggles,” Phoebe snapped, glancing at Harry.

“I wasn’t,” Adrian protested. “It’s a joke though, some Ministry git muggle-baiting? Bad timing, too. Da says the Minister himself isn’t too keen on that Muggle Protection Act. Says it’s bad for business. And now his nephew’s vanishing trains.”

The article didn’t say whether the train had been retrieved, or if there were any casualties. Sickened, Harry set the *Prophet* down.

“A suspension,” he said, shaking his head. He picked up the milk again, hoping his spell had worked but not particularly caring at the moment. It’d only make him a bit ill if he’d got it wrong. He added some milk to his tea, watching it swirl around in little wispy clouds, then took a bracing sip.

“Pucey,” Marcus called out. “Time to go.”

Adrian stood. “See you, lads.”

Harry didn’t watch him go, not giving anything away. Astrid stayed in her seat, though she was plainly unhappy to not be with the rest of the team.

“An hour, you said?” she asked quietly.

“At most,” Harry replied, seeing the Ravenclaw team stand, getting vocal encouragement from the other houses. He watched as Cedric said something to the Ravenclaw seeker,

making the girl blush.

“I hope it works,” Astrid said, frowning at the departing Ravensclaws.

Harry smiled behind his tea. “It will.”

Watching Miles Bletchley be sick all over the quaffle he’d barely caught was magnificent. Moments later, Cho Chang, who had blocked Draco Malfoy, narrowly avoided being thrown up on as well.

Harry painted a look of surprise on his face while Astrid fell about, clutching his arm as she struggled to breathe through her laughter.

“What did you do?” Cassius asked. “For my own edification.”

Harry snorted. “Right. It’s called syrup of ipecac. I got it from the chemist’s when out for my appointment.”

“A muggle potion?”

“I suppose you could call it that,” Harry said. “I’ve no idea what it’s made out of, I just know it makes people throw up. And I doubt Madam Pomfrey would think to check for it. It’s not dangerous,” he said, noticing Jasmine’s alarmed look. “They give it to kids when they’ve had something that makes them ill.”

“Fascinating,” Cassius said. They watched Miles wobble unsteadily on his broom as he threw up again. Draco wasn’t doing well either, and Marcus was forced to call a timeout.

“Looks like it’s our time to shine,” Astrid said, unable to contain her grin as Marcus sent a few sparks into the air. She and Terence hurried out of the stands while Marcus talked to Madam Hooch, pointing at the incapacitated Draco and Miles.

“You can’t do this every game,” Cassius said.

“I know that,” Harry replied. “It would be too suspicious. That it’s specifically Malfoy and Bletchley who are sick already *is* suspect. This isn’t a long term solution.”

Cassius gave him a shrewd look. “Then what is?”

Harry shook his head, watching as his dad walked onto the pitch along with Professor Flitwick and Madam Pomfrey. Soon stretchers were conjured and the afflicted players were floated away. For a moment, his dad looked up into the stands, and Harry knew he was caught. But then Astrid ran onto the pitch with her broom, Terence close behind. It was worth it.

Severus stared into his water, wishing he had something stronger.

It was dinner and the castle was still buzzing with Slytherin's victory over Ravenclaw. Their team had a good chance of winning even with Malfoy and Bletchley, patently inferior players to the more experienced Urquhart and Higgs. Most of that had to do with the brooms Lucius had purchased for the entire team. Brooms Urquhart and Higgs notably hadn't used.

He knew Harry was behind it.

While it was only polite to not sabotage one's own team, that Slytherin had won in a landslide almost supported Harry's actions. The two boys hadn't even been that ill, and likely would have been able to keep playing if Madam Pomfrey hadn't kept them in the hospital wing to determine what was wrong with them. Her only conclusion was it had been something they had eaten.

He thought back to Harry's last dentist appointment, him tentatively asking if he could stop by a chemist's for gum. Gum. Severus snorted. The boy had, correctly, assumed Severus would cover for him. It was easy to lay accusations of foul play, and if Lucius owed he could say the man's son must have lost his nerve, given his abject failure against Gryffindor. Or some other excuse, it didn't matter. Lucius had no right to complain after the basilisk. After Severus' own son had almost died.

"Look at that," Burbage said as owls flew into the Great Hall. "Must be the *Evening Prophet*. Wonder what's happened? Maybe Fudge has finally been carted off to Azkaban."

"Which Fudge?" Severus asked.

"Both, if we're lucky," she said, fishing out some coins to pay the owl for the evening edition. "Oh, shit."

Burbage was staring wide-eyed at the paper. Severus waited for her to elaborate, then finally asked, "What?"

She passed the paper to him. "There's been another raid on Malfoy Manor. Serves the rat bastards right, if you ask me. All those *raids* they did during the war. At least the Ministry isn't torturing them. Or killing them."

Severus scanned the article, pushing down his emotions. He'd been on those raids. He didn't care to recall what all had happened during those times. It was unpleasant.

He was unsurprised to see Arthur Weasley having conducted the raid, apparently having found a secret chamber under the Malfoy's drawing room floor, packed with dark artifacts. The article went on to talk about a dark artifact entering Hogwarts, an artifact responsible for

the petrifications. There was no hope of keeping that quiet, not with hundreds of students owling home. The only surprising thing was the *Prophet* taking so long to report on it.

Severus handed the paper back to Burbage and resumed his meal. He wouldn't have to worry about hearing from Lucius for a while. He had been taken in for questioning, after all.

Harry was glad to see that Pansy, Vince, and Greg stuck by Draco. It wasn't Draco's fault what his father got up to. And he might have felt a little bad about effectively poisoning the kid, no matter how mild it was. The weeks Draco had spent laughing over the attacks on Mrs. Norris and Colin Creevey, loudly wishing the next muggleborn would be killed, seemed more distant now that a culture war was playing out on the pages of the *Daily Prophet*.

Nearly everyone in Slytherin had experienced the emotional whiplash. The school's opinion had changed yet again as letters from their family members appeared in the *Prophet*, defending what they claimed to be family heirlooms and historical artifacts, while others spoke out against such items circulating in the muggle world, or worse, Hogwarts.

There wasn't a significant impact on them—most students weren't regular readers of the *Prophet*—but the mood was certainly subdued in Slytherin. Harry's friends weren't very interested in talking about the Muggle Protection Act.

Astrid's mother worked for the Ministry, but her department was only tangentially related. Adrian's father was on the Wizengamot, which had closed its chambers after the Rufus Fudge fiasco. Cassius' grandmother did something in foreign affairs, and the most he'd say about it was that Britain was the laughingstock of the international magical community, second only to America. Phoebe's family was in the broom making business and not very involved in Ministry affairs. Terence, Harry learned, also had a relative on the Wizengamot, Roberta "Bertie" Higgs, no relation to the jelly beans. Though Jasmine's father had been an Unspeakable prior to his incarceration, her mother rarely spent any time in Britain, preferring to reside in Guadeloupe with their extended family.

Between the lack of interest, clubs, and school, Harry found himself slightly desperate for a conversation partner. He had tried talking to Cedric about current events, but he didn't think Cedric was very interested and Harry didn't want to bore him. It was fair, since he'd prefer not to talk about quidditch.

Who Harry really wanted to speak with was a frustratingly elusive Percival Septimus Weasley. Considering his father was being presented as the only sane man in the *Prophet*, and was pushing his Muggle Protection Act with a vengeance, Percy was likely the best informed student in the school. The latest interview had quoted Mr. Weasley as posing a hypothetical extremely reminiscent of the possession of Ginny Weasley.

Harry leaned against a wall during Transfiguration, thinking over his options. The room had been emptied of desks as that was what they were attempting to conjure that lesson. Astrid

kept making toddler-sized ones, and her growing agitation made it harder for her to focus. Fred and George Weasley were up to something with their friend Lee Jordan, as usual. Harry was hesitant to approach them about where their brother could be found. He would just send an owl and arrange a meeting. That was perfectly normal.

He glanced at Astrid's latest attempt, which resembled an abstract interpretation of a desk more than the actual thing. The failures were starting to pile up.

"Maybe you can transfigure it into a bigger one," he suggested. Transfiguration was widely considered some of the most difficult magic to perform, and Astrid was determined to excel at it.

"That rather defeats the purpose of the lesson, Mr. Evans," Professor McGonagall said, having walked over to observe their efforts. "Your earlier attempts were admirable, Miss Urquhart. Exhausting yourself will only make subsequent attempts less...ideal."

Astrid clenched her jaw. "Yes, professor."

As soon as McGonagall passed, Astrid tried again.

"You wished to speak with me?"

Harry looked up from the book he was defacing with red ink. Percy was right on time.

Harry had spent some time thinking about why, exactly, Percy seemed to be avoiding him. He'd chosen to meet in the *Daily Prophet* archive, for its familiarity and the readily available papers.

"I don't blame you," Harry said, setting his quill down.

Percy looked taken aback. "I'm sorry?"

"For what happened with the basilisk," Harry clarified. "I don't really blame your sister either. I hope she's got help recovering from being possessed."

Percy hadn't moved from the doorway, which Harry took as a bad sign. Had he been wrong? He had no idea what else would explain Percy's distant behavior.

"Since you were involved in the Chamber situation, I suppose it's fine for me to tell you," Percy said. "There was actually a rather spirited disagreement about what to do. Ginevra, of course, was adamantly against speaking with anyone about her experience, given the last person she confided in turned out to be You-Know-Who. But she has weekly appointments at St. Mungo's. I've been told she has begun a rapport with Colin Creevey, who hopes to return to school by Easter." Percy paused, then added, "They do homework together."

“That’s...that’s really good,” Harry said. “She apologized to me, you know.”

Percy nodded. “I do.”

“Great,” Harry said, feeling suddenly nervous.

“May I ask what you are doing to that book?” Percy asked, walking over.

Harry looked down at *Gilderoy Lockhart’s Guide to Household Pests*. “I’m editing it.”

“It’s already been published,” Percy said drily.

“Yeah, along with the rest of the rubbish he’s written,” Harry said. “Cedric said his dad *swore by it*, and I’m starting to think he meant swore *at it*.”

Percy made a weird face at the mention of Cedric, but his expression quickly smoothed out. “I’ve tried explaining to my mother, but she remains an enthusiast.”

“I met your parents,” Harry blurted. “They’re...really nice.”

Percy smiled. “They are.” He looked around the room. “Is there any particular reason you chose this location for our meeting?”

“Actually, there is,” Harry said, pushing Lockhart’s book to the side. “You’ve been following the *Prophet* these past few weeks?”

“I have,” Percy said, taking a seat. This settled something in Harry. He had been worried Percy might just leave.

“What do you think?” Harry asked, throwing a broad net. “About the proposed changes to the MPA?”

“Well, we don’t know much,” Percy said, leaning back in his chair. “Father’s been reticent in our recent correspondence. I think the core issue is that muggle-baiting is hard to convict. Muggle witnesses aren’t considered reliable, and are only brought in for extreme cases. Their memories are too easily tampered with, and potions such as Veritaserum tend to have an exaggerated effect without native magic to mitigate it.”

“Yeah, there’s been a lot of anecdotes printed,” Harry said, sorting through the *Prophets* which he definitely hadn’t compiled ahead of time. “If they’ve got shrinking keys, they’ll insist they just keep losing them.”

Percy smiled slightly. “That was one of my father’s, I believe. There is a sort of magical blindness muggles have, even those with witches and wizards in the family. They have a limited idea of what magic is capable of. We don’t know if it’s an effect of magic itself on them, a sort of in-built survival mechanism, a product of muggle culture, or some other impetus.”

Harry picked up the latest issue of the *Prophet*, which had another article featuring Arthur Weasley. The one that made him determined to speak with Percy.

“I have seven children, five currently at Hogwarts,” says Mr. Weasley. “I shudder to think what would happen if one of them got their hands on some of the things my department confiscates.”

“He’s not going to talk about what happened with your sister, right?” Harry asked.

Percy shook his head. “My mother wouldn’t allow it. The headmaster agrees with her, and while I know father would love to get one over on Malfoy, he wouldn’t at the expense of Ginny.”

Harry nodded. “So, they’ve published an excerpt from the preamble. Now, the way this is phrased...”

Doom and Gloom

Chapter Summary

February 1993

Luna Lovegood appeared in the strangest places, such as under the quivering leaves of a flutterby bush during Harry's Herbology lesson.

"What's this?" Harry whispered, ignoring the look he was getting from Terence and taking the note Luna was handing him. "Are you an owl?"

"I wanted to be an owl when I grew up," Luna whispered back. "Do you think I still can be?"

"Maybe if you learn to be an animagus you'll get to be," Harry said, glancing at Professor Sprout. She was busy dealing with the Venomous Tentacula, which was going through another teething.

"That would be wonderful," Luna said, eyes sparkling. "I think I'd like to be a snowy owl."

"What are you doing in my Herbology class?" Harry asked, slapping away one of the Tentacula's tendrils. The plant was incorrigible.

"I fell asleep," Luna said.

Harry waited for her to finish her explanation, but Luna just kept looking at him.

"Don't you have class?" he prompted.

"Oh, yes," Luna said. "I had class, and now I don't."

"Because the class is over?" Harry guessed.

Luna nodded, then retreated into the flutterby bushes.

"What just happened?" Terence asked.

Harry shrugged, then opened his note.

Dear Harry,

I was talking to Luna about needing another owl, and she said it was a shame that I couldn't use Hedwig and that it might hurt her feelings if I used another owl. Then Luna said she had always wanted to be an owl. So I've given her this note as a test. She says owls have their own magic, and can find people no matter where they are. I just thought Hedwig was really smart. Maybe both?

Neville was talking about you in the common room. He tried to speak up about you not being the Heir last year, since you helped him with his wand, but everyone laughed at him. He's got a new wand, by the way. His gran got it for him for Christmas, and he's doing better in classes. Anyway, he said it was thanks to you. He's on the gobstones team, so him and Luna get on.

Ginny's doing better. It turns out Luna lives near the Burrow—that's where the Weasleys live—and they've known each other for ages. I'm not sure if they're friends, though.

Did you see what happened to Malfoy at the game? Me and Ron thought it was funny, but Hermione said it wouldn't be funny if it happened to us. Maybe she's still upset about Ron making him vomit slugs?

Lockhart's been talking about a morale-booster. What do you think it is?

If you write back, you can give the letter to Luna. I'm sure she'll be able to find me.

Best,

Monty

“Who's that from?” Terence asked.

“Luna,” he said, given she'd been the one who had handed it to him. Terence shrugged, and they went back to pruning.

When class ended, Harry waded through the flutterby bushes and found Luna sleeping like a little cat. Or perhaps an owlet, considering she was face down. Harry sighed and summoned her school things, relieved that *Luna's rucksack* worked for the spell. For some reason her bag had been up in a tree. He knelt down and put a hand on her shoulder.

Luna was up like a shot. “Is it tea?”

“Not quite,” Harry said, aware his friends were waiting for him. “Let's go back to the castle. I can compose a reply for you.”

Harry hesitated, then brushed dirt off Luna's robes. He ignored the cooing going on behind him. He knew that Luna's mother had passed away not long before she began school. He knew exactly what it was like to feel so lost. Luna wasn't *loony*, as he had heard some of her fellow Ravenclaws call her. She was grieving.

“Come on, mooncalf,” he said, helping her stand.

“Daddy’s seen mooncalves dance before,” she said, taking her rucksack. “He says there’s a herd in the Forbidden Forest.”

“Maybe Hagrid knows where they are,” Harry said, leading Luna out of the greenhouse.

“You’ve got a duckling,” Astrid said, nudging him.

“Luna is an owl,” Harry said. “Obviously.”

He looked over and saw Jasmine petting Luna’s hair. She’d got flutterby petals stuck in it somehow.

“If you want a little sister, you can borrow Mhairi,” Astrid said. “Mum says her new favorite word is *why*. You should have seen her during Christmas. It looked like an erumpent tore through the house.”

Harry shook his head. He already had a little brother, who he needed to write back.

There were some practical issues with skateboarding in a dungeon. For one, the floor wasn’t smooth. The gaps between stones caught on his wheels, slowing Harry down or stopping him completely. It made the ride shaky, and very loud, amplified by the echoey corridors. This presented a problem as Harry snuck out after curfew to get in practice. So he used magic to transfigure the floor, and silencing charms so as not to call attention to himself. The dungeons weren’t often patrolled by anyone other than his dad and the occasional Slytherin prefect, who had no incentive for docking points. Still, Harry was rarely caught.

One February evening, Harry was minding his own business, breaking curfew and wondering if the hospital flip he was trying to nail would land him in the hospital wing, when he heard a noise from one of the many unused chambers in the dungeons. Curious who else was lurking in the dungeons so late at night, Harry disillusioned himself, picked up his board, and silently crept towards the door. It was slightly ajar, which explained why he’d heard anything at all. Had the person wanted to hear if anyone was approaching? He guessed it was a younger student, but what could they possibly find interesting in an empty room?

Harry peeked in through the crack and immediately recoiled, heart racing. That was...

He shut his eyes tightly, wondering if there was a self-obliviation spell. Maybe he was imagining things. Steeling himself, Harry looked into the room again.

It was Percy. Percy and Penelope. Percy and Penelope snogging.

Harry backed away again, the scene burned into his memory. Penelope’s curls, golden under the torch light. Pressed against an old desk. Robes parted. Percy’s hands...

Harry derailed that train of thought. No. Definitely not.

It wasn't as if he'd never seen people kiss before, but it was *Percy*.

He slumped against a wall, then jumped back up when he realized he could still hear them, sounds he wished he had never heard coming out of apparent slag Penelope Clearwater.

He shook his head, knowing he was being unfair. Percy was also a slag.

"Fuck," he muttered, grabbing his head. He felt something inside of him die a little, the bitter shock of disillusionment, and not the magical kind.

Harry wasn't stupid. He'd seen them on prefect rounds together, in the library together, chatting in the entrance hall together, last year when the Weird Sisters played in the Forbidden Forest. He just thought...

"Did you hear that?" he heard Percy say. Harry froze. He knew he wouldn't be caught, unless they did a revealing charm.

"Hear what?" Penelope said. "It's probably nothing. Come on, Percy..."

Harry shuddered at her tone.

"You should get back to your rounds," Percy said. There was the sound of furniture shifting.

"But we were just getting started."

"Be reasonable," Percy said. "You go on."

"Fine," Penelope said crisply. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Harry clutched his skateboard to his chest as the door opened and a miffed Penelope walked out, heels clicking as she strode down the corridor. After she had disappeared around a corner, he glanced into the room again.

Percy was standing over the same desk he'd had Penelope pressed against, bracing himself with a hand as he wiped his mouth. He shook his head, then pulled something out of his robes. Harry couldn't make out the details, but it looked like a golden gyroscope. Percy began to spin it, and he understood. It was the Time-Turner.

Fascinated, Harry watched as Percy faded away, leaving the room completely empty.

"The fuck," he said, almost forgetting the midnight rendezvous he had unfortunately witnessed. Time travel was actually possible. Harry knew it was, his dad had told him as much. But to actually see it in person was another thing.

After a few moments, Harry turned away from the room, letting the disillusionment shatter around him, and headed back to his dormitory. He'd have to find another part of the dungeons to practice in.

An hour in the past, Percy silently watched Harry practice his skateboarding. His descriptions hadn't quite done the activity justice, and Harry's dexterity was impressive. Percy couldn't understand how the tricks were even performed.

He winced when he heard Penelope's soft moan, which Harry had obviously also heard. Then, with a tap of his wand, Harry vanished.

That wasn't how the Disillusionment Charm worked, not for a fourth-year, or a sixth-year, or even adult witches and wizards. It didn't turn people invisible, and yet that was what Harry had just done. It was remarkable.

He grimaced when he realized Harry was too distracted by the torrid affair to notice he, in turn, was being watched. Then his past self used the Time-Turner, and Harry's disillusionment cracked, falling away from him like shards of iridescent crystal. It was beautiful.

There was a quiet devastation on Harry's face as he walked away.

Percy wiped his mouth again, feeling ill. He probably needed to eat.

He watched as Harry disappeared into the gloom of the dungeons.

It was for the best.

Luna wasn't the only messenger, though she often made an appearance. Sometimes a message would be carried by Benjy the little thestral, or a school owl, and Harry would trek to the owlery to give his replies to Hedwig.

He was unaccountably grateful that Monty had decided to write about his daily life. It let him get to know his brother better, and his brother's friends. It helped him take his mind off of other things when school work failed to.

Monty's question about Lockhart's mysterious morale-booster was answered on a day in February which Harry had never in his life celebrated.

Valentine's Day.

It fell on a Hogsmeade weekend. Cedric had already asked Harry if he wanted to go together, which he readily agreed to. He had no idea what to expect.

What he *didn't* expect was the rose-tinted nightmare the Great Hall had been turned into.

"What in the ever-loving fuck is happening?" Adrian said, taking a step back. Astrid shoved him through the door.

Harry reached out a hand, and pieces of heart-shaped confetti drifted onto his palm. "I am... ambivalent."

"Well, *I* love it," Phoebe gushed, twirling so her robes caught more pieces of confetti. "It's so pink!"

The ceiling was pale blue, complimenting the profusion of giant pink flowers decorating the walls. Harry looked around, saw the looks of disgust many of the younger boys had as they picked confetti out of their breakfasts. Harry briefly considered going to the kitchens to eat, but was swept along to the Slytherin table. He spotted Cedric and saw to his dismay that Cedric seemed *very* into it.

"I can't stand this lovey-dovey shite," Astrid said, whipping out her wand. "*Ventus!*"

Confetti was violently blown away from their group, but more kept falling from the ceiling. It was unstoppable.

Harry fished a few pieces out of his tea.

"Welcome to hell," Cassius said, setting a cloud of confetti on fire.

It was going to be a long day.

Severus sat rigidly in his seat next to a giggling Charity Burbage.

"At least someone's amused by these shenanigans," he grumbled, watching as she clutched her stomach, doubled over in mirth.

"Shenanigans," she said through her laughter, wiping tears from her eyes. "Oh my god, that's the perfect word for it. This is brilliant. Look at their faces! They hate it! Oh, bloody hell, look at Lockhart."

Lockhart sauntered to the head table in tacky pink robes.

"That's it, I'm charming mine pink too," Burbage said, and Severus looked at her in alarm. "Do you remember when he sent himself all those owls with Valentines? I think me and him were in third year. Hundreds of owls, shitting in the porridge."

Severus did remember that day. Lockhart hadn't been the only one making a dramatic display, though he had given James Potter a run for his money. It was in their seventh year,

when Lily had decided to give Potter a chance. While she had been pregnant with Harry.

Severus took a sip of coffee as a burst of fire immolated the confetti around the Slytherin table.

Taking this as his cue, Lockhart spun to face the students, his arms spread wide like an utter twat, as Miss Urquhart might say.

“Happy Valentine’s Day!” he shouted, taking in the less than eager faces. “And may I thank the forty-six people who have so far sent me cards! Yes, I have taken the liberty of arranging this little surprise for you all, and it doesn’t end here!”

“Forty-six,” Burbage muttered. “Does it not bother him that he’s getting cards from *children*?”

“You were in the same year as him?” Severus asked, feeling some pity for his colleague.

“Yeah,” she said. “Not that he’d remember. He wouldn’t have given me the time of day.”

Severus raised his eyebrows.

“I’m not exactly arm-candy,” she said flatly. “More like arm-pudding. Or an arm-blancmange.”

“Blancmange is perfectly adequate,” he said, not understanding what she was getting at, and very distracted by the dwarfs dressed like cupids marching into the Great Hall.

Burbage started laughing again, so he assumed she was fine.

Harry fled the castle as soon as he could. He’d seen the look on his dad’s face when Lockhart invited people to ask him how to *whip up a love potion*. He was deeply concerned Cedric might get the idea to send one of the dwarfs after him. They’d been tackling people all morning, with no sign of letting up. Monty, who was *twelve*, had got a disturbing number of owls.

Harry was leaning against a tree, watching students make their way to Hogsmeade.

“Harry!”

He looked up and saw Cedric hurrying across the lawn. He was wearing blue robes, and looked rather dashing.

“I thought we were meeting in the entrance hall?” Cedric asked.

“I needed to get out of the warzone,” Harry said, glancing up at the castle.

“Not a fan of this Valentine’s stuff?” Cedric asked.

“Was it that obvious?” Harry asked, tugging down his sleeves. It was a sunny day, but a little crisp, so he’d worn the jumper Mrs. Weasley had sent. He liked that it was a little big on him, since it helped hide his chest binding.

He knew it was something he should talk to Cedric about soon. He didn’t want to.

“You’re a bit doom and gloom for this stuff,” Cedric said blithely. “You’re okay with going to Hogsmeade together, right? On a date?”

Harry covered his face to hide his blush. “Yeah. It’ll be fun.”

The walk to Hogsmeade was nice, and Harry even let Cedric hold his hand. After his unfortunate dungeon ogling, Harry had spent some time considering the reality of being in a relationship with another boy. He could deal with hugging, and handholding, and kissing. Anything beyond that was terrifyingly nebulous, even with the help of Adrian’s lurid magazines. Harry couldn’t imagine trusting anyone that much. He had no idea what Cedric expected of him.

Being next to Cedric, who was older, taller, more blatantly masculine, rudely reminded Harry of his differences. They were less pronounced, now that he was taking potions to force his body into compliance, but the differences were still there. Just the thought of taking his shirt off around other people had Harry spiraling. There was no chance in hell.

They did the usual circuit around Hogsmeade. Some shops had done a Lockhart, bedecked in flowers, hearts, bows and arrows, balloons and streamers. Honeydukes was among the worst offenders, but Harry was more than a little addicted to sweets given his years of privation, and didn’t care whether they were heart-shaped.

“Where do you want to eat?” Cedric asked, squeezing his hand. Harry was still getting used to it, all the attention Cedric drew. Harry imagined he looked like a leech in comparison. “What about here?”

Cedric stopped in front of Madam Puddifoot’s Tea Shop. Harry went cold with dread. It looked like the kind of place Jasmine would like. The decor featured an inordinate amount of lace. Harry would have gone in with Jasmine, or even Adrian for a laugh. But with Cedric?

Harry knew even as he thought it that it was stereotypical, even sexist, but it looked like a very *girly* place, the kind of place a bloke would take a girl to because she liked it, a place he would tolerate for the sake of her enjoyment. The number of couples—the number of *straight* couples—both people he vaguely recognized from Hogwarts and some adults, confirmed this.

What truly decided Harry, though, wasn’t the frills or lace, or the golden cherubs spewing confetti onto the happy couples, it was a particular couple he saw.

Percy Weasley and Penelope Clearwater.

“I don’t care for the menu,” Harry said, an opinion pulled directly out of his arse. “What about the Three Broomsticks?”

Cedric accepted this reasoning without comment, and they walked to the Three Broomsticks. Harry didn’t spare much thought for Percy and Penelope. Madam Puddifoot’s was a death trap for Percy. It looked like they were more on a job interview than a date. Harry shook his head, focused on how warm Cedric’s hand felt in his. He had someone who genuinely liked him.

The Three Broomsticks was packed to the gills.

Cedric deflated.

“It’s fine,” Harry said. “We can come back later. Or what about the Hog’s Head?”

“The Hog’s Head? Are students even allowed in there?”

Harry shrugged. “It’d be fun to find out.”

Cedric was skeptical, but Harry pulled him along, turning off the high street to the less picturesque part of Hogsmeade, the part of the village that didn’t cater to tourists and students.

“Are you sure about this?” Cedric asked, staring at the large, actively bleeding pig’s head on the sign.

“Never been to a real pub?” Harry teased. “I’ll protect you from anything scary, I promise.”

“I should be the one saying that,” Cedric said, following Harry into the Hog’s Head.

It was pretty much what Harry had imagined when he had first heard of the place. It wasn’t dissimilar to the pubs he nicked matches from in Cokeworth. Dark, dingy, sticky floor, shady characters, somehow both too hot and drafty, air thick with smoke.

There was an older man behind the bar who watched as Harry and Cedric approached. He had long grey hair and sharp blue eyes, tall and thin, bent by years of labor.

“Pint of bitter,” Harry said with a smile, wanting to know what the man would do.

He kept rubbing a dirty cloth over the glass he held. Harry didn’t understand why he didn’t use magic to clean. Was he a squib?

“Um, do you have butterbeer?” Cedric asked, looking terribly out of place. His clothes were far too nice. *He* was far too nice.

“Two sickles a bottle,” the old man said, decidedly unamused by Harry’s request. Cedric set the coins on the bar, and the man unearthed two bottles that had seen better days.

“Cheers,” Harry said, taking the bottles and leading Cedric to a corner table. The pub was empty, save for two people sitting in a slightly dingier corner, wearing matching hats and

sunglasses. Harry sat down, pulling the corks out of the bottles, then did a double take.

The two people in the corner noticed. They started shaking their heads frantically, pointing at Cedric, whose back was to them. Harry narrowed his eyes and mouthed *later*, watching the two people—Fred and George Weasley, he was absolutely certain of that—nod desperately.

He turned back to Cedric, who was looking somewhat nervous. Harry felt a little bad for his suggestion, but was confused by Cedric's reaction. The Hog's Head wasn't that bad. It was the middle of the day, it was dead, there weren't any fights going on. It wasn't as pretty as the Three Broomsticks, but it wasn't condemned. It seemed normal to Harry, though, given it was ostensibly a magical pub, the lack of cleaning charms was puzzling.

Harry drank his butterbeer, smiling at the taste, trying to picture Cedric in Cokeworth. Or Knockturn Alley. If Amos Diggory would let his son go to such ignoble places.

He couldn't do it.

Cedric was fidgety as they walked back to the castle. Harry had no idea what was going on with him, since it had been a decent day in his opinion.

"Do you want to walk around the Black Lake?" Cedric asked.

"Alright," Harry said, following Cedric down to the shore. It was early afternoon, and the sun was shining happily down from a lovely blue sky. The Giant Squid stuck an exploratory tentacle out then immediately pulled it back in. A red cap snarled at them and scampered off with a rabbit it had caught. The Whomping Willow whomped.

"Harry," Cedric said, stopping suddenly and letting go of his hand.

"Yeah?" Harry asked, looking at him.

Cedric lifted a hand, cupping one of Harry's cheeks. Harry kept staring as Cedric's face got closer and closer. He shut his eyes, just as Cedric gently kissed him. He tentatively reached up, touching Cedric's jaw. His heart was pounding, his head emptying of anything other than how soft and warm Cedric's lips were.

Cedric slowly pulled back, smiling at him. It was dazzling. Cedric close up always was.

"Harry," Cedric said. "Will you go out with me?"

Harry stared dumbly at him until he found his voice. "Yes."

After asking his question, and getting a favorable answer, Cedric excused himself as he had quidditch practice. Harry was fine with that, as he had gobstones practice later and needed to figure out what the hell had just happened.

He didn't immediately go to the common room to tell everyone the good news, the grand finale to months of build up. Harry wasn't quite sure how he felt. He'd just been kissed, and felt a bit put on the spot. But Cedric liked him. Harry was keeping some pretty big, pretty important secrets from him, but Cedric liked him despite his reserve. It was really nice being wanted.

He rubbed his arm, biting his lip in thought as he wandered past shrieking students and dwarfs in hot pursuit, barely cognizant of what was happening around him. As such, he was startled when two pairs of hands seized him and dragged him into an empty room.

"Nice jumper," George said, giving Harry a once over.

"Some of mum's finest work," Fred added as he shut the door.

"It's one of Percy's old ones," George said with an unnerving smile. "She makes them every year, so they pile up."

"How was your date with Diggory?" Fred asked, walking around to stand next to his brother.

"It was nice," Harry said, hoping he wasn't blushing.

"Fit one, him," George said.

"Nice catch, Evans," Fred said.

"How'd you two get past Filch and McGonagall?" Harry asked, not in the mood for teasing. Percy's jumper, that was bloody fantastic.

"That's for us to know, and you to find out," George said. "If you don't go blabbing."

Harry crossed his arms. "I'd rather have one over on you two, I think. I don't need to sneak out of the castle."

Fred and George looked at each other.

"That's it?" George asked. "We owe you one?"

Harry nodded.

The twins looked at each other again.

"Deal."

Orders of Operations

Chapter Summary

March/April 1993

Chapter Notes

The comments, my god, the *comments*. I love it. Thank you, you are all wonderful!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Darling, where are your shoes?”

Harry looked down and saw Luna wiggling her toes, as if to show off her shoeless state. They were at the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw game. If Gryffindor lost, Slytherin had a straight shot to the cup. Luna had shown up in the Slytherin stands, wedging herself between him and Jasmine.

“I’m not sure,” Luna said, kicking her legs.

Harry exchanged glances with Jasmine, whose grip tightened on her parasol as if planning to whack whoever had stolen Luna’s shoes. Harry didn’t blame her. There were little signs about what was going on with Luna, which Harry had observed since term had started. The blunt quills, mischievous nargles, unwashed hair, missing shoes.

Around them, their fellow Slytherins were singing.

His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,

His hair is as dark as a blackboard.

I wish he was mine, he’s really divine,

The hero who conquered the Dark Lord

After making his deal with Fred and George, Harry had caught the tail end of one of the dwarfs sitting on his brother, singing the same song. Even weeks later the lyrics were stuck in

everyone's heads.

Harry had cornered the dwarf, his annoyance spiking as he learned the dwarf was a seventy-year-old fellow named Clyde with a smoker's cough. He was from Brighton and had just been laid off from the goblin mine he'd been working at. The goblins were now importing copper from Chile. While it was an intriguing look into goblin-dwarf relations, it didn't alleviate the anger at what had happened to his brother. Apparently Ginny had hired the dwarf. Not a single thought for the consequences.

"We need to do something about this," Jasmine said over Luna's head, Phoebe nodding vigorously at her side.

"His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad," Astrid sang on his other side as Gryffindor scored another goal. Cho Chang was doing the same tactic as previous games, marking the opposing seeker. It was banal.

Monty was great though, and Luna seemed to be having a good time watching him fly circles around Cho. By the time the game ended, Gryffindor winning by a wide margin, Jasmine had duplicated Phoebe's shoes and shrunk them down to Luna's size. Harry watched Luna wander off, debating whether to approach Flitwick directly or going to his dad first.

Luna ran out onto the pitch where Monty was being lifted up by Fred and George, the snitch held high, sparkling in the sun.

Severus was counting the days until Easter holiday. A knock on his office door interrupted his summing of the instruction hours remaining in winter term.

At his invitation, Harry walked in, a neutral expression on his face. He was almost old enough for Severus to start teaching him Occlumency and Legilimency in earnest. Having more control over his emotions would lessen Harry's growing dependency on potions.

"May I ask you for a favor?" Harry asked, taking a seat.

"What is this regarding?" he asked, lacing his fingers together.

Harry's expression darkened for a moment, then relaxed again. The boy was normally expressive, likely due to having spent so much time alone, without need to hide his feelings. But he was also an intensely private person. Perhaps Severus could give him a few books to get started with, though if he knew his son, Harry would have checked the library first, the Restricted Section if he could.

"It's regarding Luna Lovegood," Harry said.

Severus was relieved his son didn't want to talk about the insipid Diggory boy. He didn't want to second guess Harry's decision to involve himself with Diggory, but he'd seen plenty

of teenage romances over his years at Hogwarts. Harry wasn't the first to be deluded by a handsome face, and he wouldn't be the last. *C'est la vie*.

"Lovegood?" Noting how serious Harry was, Severus refrained from making any comment about the girl. He had been in a few classes with her father, and the girl had inherited many of Xenophilius' more erratic mannerisms.

"I believe her dormmates are stealing her belongings," Harry said. "Her books, her clothes, her shoes. Possibly her potions supplies."

"I might have noticed something," Severus said carefully, understanding his son's tack.

Harry smiled slightly. "Thanks, dad."

Did you know Voldemort's real name was Tom Riddle?

Harry thought over his brother's latest letter. Who had told Monty that? It must have been Ginny, perhaps to make up for her poorly thought out singing dwarf telegram. It was bold to rhyme *blackboard* with *Dark Lord*. But, if Ginny thought his brother appreciated being physically assaulted by a dwarf in a nappy, and sung at in front of a crowd, she had gravely misjudged him.

Tom Riddle. Harry was certain he had seen the name before.

He was shaken from his thoughts when three books landed in front of him. He looked up and saw Lockhart using his wand, for the first time in living memory, to distribute the same books to every student.

"The headmaster has decided that it's about time for you all to learn about some of the most heinous curses known to wizardkind," Lockhart said, twirling his wand, dropping it, picking it up, and putting it hastily away. "The Unforgivable Curses."

Lockhart had everyone's attention now, in which he thrived. "Now, can anyone tell me the names of these abominable spells?"

Harry looked through his books while his classmates entertained Lockhart. The trilogy was titled *Unforgivable Curses and Their Legal Implications*, one volume for each curse. He knew that law books were quite expensive. Tens of galleons each. How much had that cut into Lockhart's profits from assigning seven of his books to every student?

"Think we're going to cast them?" Adrian whispered to him.

Harry snorted, but was too interested in his new books to indulge Adrian's fascination with the macabre. Had Percy read these?

Harry closed his eyes, frustrated. Percy's elusiveness now had an explanation. His liaisons under the cover of darkness.

Lockhart was blathering on about some fight he'd supposedly had in Casablanca involving all three Unforgivables, while Fred and George egged him on, asking for a live demonstration.

He could still be friends with Percy. Once he could look him in the eyes again.

When class ended, Harry left with his friends, letting their conversation wash over him. Lockhart had decided to begin with what he deemed the least awful Unforgivable, the Imperius Curse. There was some merit to that, given the Imperius could be broken by those strong of will. Cruciatus and the Killing Curse were inescapable. Cruciatus left you with Alice and Frank Longbottom, committed to St. Mungo's for the rest of their lives. If it could even be called living. The Killing Curse left you with dead parents.

As they walked down the Charms corridor, they passed by the Trophy Room. Harry glanced through the door, wondering if he should give his own award a look. He still wanted to make Head Boy. He knew Percy was working on his application. His owl Hermes was getting a lot of work, probably taking letters to Percy's older brother Bill, Head Boy to Head Boy.

Harry smiled to himself, then stopped walking.

He knew where he had seen the name Tom Riddle before.

"What's wrong?" Astrid asked, having stopped too.

Harry shook his head. "Nothing, just remembered something I'd forgotten to do. Think Flitwick will be in a better mood today?"

It was, admittedly, an oversight on Harry's part. He hadn't quite thought out what it meant to date someone who had the most important position on a rival quidditch team.

"I'm not going to sabotage him," he said to Adrian the morning of the Slytherin and Hufflepuff game.

"Seduce him," Adrian insisted. "With your masculine wiles."

"I have no wiles," Harry said. "I've never been wily in my entire life."

Adrian laughed harshly. "That's a lie if I've ever heard one."

Harry wasn't going to give Draco a muggle emetic again, and Terence wasn't keen on going up against Harry's boyfriend.

That was a weird thought. He had a boyfriend.

Miles Bletchley had gracefully bowed out, likely suspecting treachery and impending physical harm in the form of one Astrid Urquhart. It wasn't unusual in the lead up to a match, to get hexed in the back. Harry was glad Percy had organized some internal defense training for Gryffindors. He hated the thought of one of his housemates trying to harm his brother over some stupid game. That Draco was among those who targeted Monty ameliorated some of Harry's guilt.

There had been rumors of the Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones being repossessed. Lucius Malfoy hadn't gone quietly. Indeed, there was little to go on at all. Merely possessing enchanted muggle artifacts wasn't enough to convict on. It was a loophole in the law, a law written by Arthur Weasley himself.

There were also rumors that continued use of the brooms was contingent on the outcome of the game. If Slytherin couldn't win, if Draco couldn't catch the snitch, on nearly four thousand galleons of top-of-the-line brooms, then what good were the brooms?

Draco, understandably, looked like he was going to be sick. Marcus had to haul him out of his seat when the teams stood. Harry turned to see Cedric and the rest of the Hufflepuff team rise in tandem. Cedric's eyes met his. Harry felt a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Think about where your loyalties lie, Evans," Astrid said, tightening her grip.

"I have always supported the Rampant Occamies," he said, smiling at Cedric.

"The fuck are you talking about?"

Sprout kept shooting Severus supercilious little looks all through breakfast. He ignored her, and whatever juvenile theatrics were happening among the students.

"It's Romeo and Juliet," Burbage said dreamily.

"No." His son was *not* that far gone.

"Two houses, alike in dignity," she continued.

Severus stared fixedly at his plate. Lockhart was on his other side, flirting ineffectually with Sinistra, a woman who had access to the Astronomy Tower and the temperament to throw someone off of it.

"In fair Hogwarts, where we play our quidditch!"

“It is the height of barbarism,” Severus said, looking up in time to see his son involved in some sort of stare-off with the Hufflepuff team, “to schedule a game the Saturday Easter holiday begins.”

“But soft, what light through yonder pitch breaks? It is the snitch, and the bludger is the sun! Arise, fair bludger, and bludge the envious seeker, who is already sick and pale with grief that thou her keeper art far more...better at quidditch...than she!” Burbage finished triumphantly.

“Incredible,” Severus said. “Did you come up with that all on your own?”

Burbage grinned at him “I had some help from old Billy Shakespeare.”

“But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,” Severus said, shaking his head. He flinched when Burbage banged her head on the table.

“Cheeky git,” she grumbled. “One bloody line and you’ve already outdone me.”

“*There’s* an ethical use of the Imperius,” Adrian said, kicking a locker. “Imperius Malfoy into being a better bloody player!”

“Quit your whining,” Astrid said, stripping off her gear. “What are you doing here anyway, Haz? Shouldn’t you be celebrating with your boyfriend?”

Harry shrugged. “It was a good game.”

Astrid looked like she wanted to start kicking things too. “I know. Merlin, I hate seekers. They’ve got one job, and if they do it well that’s it. Doesn’t matter how good a keeper I am, or how well Adrian and the others play.” She stopped talking, shutting her eyes in a pained expression. “Malfoy *might* be a decent player in a few years. He’s not some insane prodigy like Potter. He’s too afraid to take risks.”

“He’s too short, is what he is,” Terence said, appearing in the doorway of the changing room. “Diggory’s nearly got a foot on him.”

“Thank you, Terence,” Astrid said tightly. “I was there.”

That was what it had come down to. Neck and neck, Draco may have had a faster broom, but Cedric had a longer reach.

“It’s not his fault,” Harry said, seeing the misplaced guilt on Terence’s face. “Marcus is graduating this year. You’ve still got three years of quidditch, Astrid.”

“You can play non-league after school,” Adrian said, sighing and dropping onto a bench to unlace his boots. “Over summer. You’ve got options.”

Astrid hung her head. “It was our last game of the season.”

“Astrid,” Harry began, not knowing what she needed.

“Go on, Haz,” Astrid said wearily. “Go congratulate Diggory on being tall.”

Harry stood outside of the Hufflepuff changing room, arms crossed nervously as he waited. He’d hid around the side, not wanting to be seen by the rest of the Hufflepuff team.

Unless something truly bizarre happened and Marcus decided to stay on for another year, the Slytherin team would need a new captain. There were only a few options. Cassius knew more about quidditch than Harry did, and had some motivation to help with the player analysis. And, with Marcus leaving, that opened up a chaser position.

“Diggory, look, it’s your boyfriend!”

Harry’s arms tightened around himself, and he looked over to see the jubilant team having emerged.

“Thanks, McManus,” Cedric said, smiling at Harry. He walked towards him, waving off his jeering teammates. Harry lived with three other boys, and Adrian was particularly crass, so it wasn’t anything he hadn’t heard before. It was still embarrassing.

“Sorry about them,” Cedric said when he reached Harry.

“They’re just taking the piss,” Harry said dismissively. “You did well today.”

“You think?” Cedric said, running a hand through his hair. “I was going to apologize for winning.”

“There’s more to quidditch than winning,” Harry said. “The better team doesn’t always win.”

“Are you saying the Slytherin team is better?” Cedric asked, cocking his head.

“Objectively,” Harry said, worried he’d insulted Cedric. “What I mean is, if you look at individual player statistics, the number of chaser assists—”

Cedric kissed him. “I was just messing with you,” he said.

Harry nodded, flustered.

Someone whistled, and Cedric blushed, pressing his forehead against Harry’s, his arms braced protectively around him.

“Prats,” Cedric muttered. “They’ll want me in the common room. See you later, okay?”

Cedric gave him another, chaste kiss, sighed, then went to join his team. Harry hung back, watching them walk towards the castle. Shoving each other, laughing, making jibes. It was all very laddish, and Cedric fit right in.

Astrid had gone home for the holiday, which Harry didn't argue against. He knew how cut up she was. Terence went as well, and most others who weren't in their O.W.L. or N.E.W.T. year. It left a quiet castle.

Harry had retreated to the library, an island in the sea of drama that churned around him. There had been another article on Lucius Malfoy that morning, calling a number of the charges laid against him *frivolous*. It seemed like Mr. Weasley had jumped the gun, spurred on by what happened with Ginny.

"My family's heirlooms were stored securely at home," says Mr. Malfoy, "not given to some muggle charity shop."

Harry had found a copy of *Legal Guidelines for the Manufacture of Magical Apparatus*, something he'd eventually need to familiarize himself with. Parsing the legalese was a frustrating endeavor, the language almost intentional in its obfuscation. He was glad he'd been studying Latin, otherwise he would be drawing blanks at terms like *res nullius*, *caveat emptor*, and *volenti non fit iniuria*.

Nevertheless, he had five dictionaries with him. Old English, Middle English, French, Latin, and modern English. While Harry was well-read for his age, a word like *usufruct* gave him pause.

Luna was with him, happily drawing with colored pencils which had been recovered for her by Flitwick. Harry didn't know if the bullying had stopped, but he'd taught Luna some locking charms she could manage at her age, and he knew the Ravenclaw prefects had been chastised for not noticing what was happening. He wished he could have been there to see Penelope Clearwater's face.

Someone else joined them at their table, and Harry was both elated and concerned to see his brother.

"Sorry," Monty said quietly, looking around anxiously. "I wanted to ask you something, though."

Harry nodded, casting an Imperturbable Charm. He turned to Monty to ask what was going on, but saw Luna had stilled.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked.

Luna kept staring at her paper, but she had started shaking, the pencil she held skidding across the page.

“Luna?”

She didn’t respond. Harry had no idea what was going on. He’d only cast a silencing charm.

“*Noysen*,” he said, dispelling the charm. Luna relaxed immediately, blinking away tears. Harry exchanged concerned looks with Monty. He had no idea a silencing charm could have such a strong effect on someone. Luna went back to drawing, incorporating the stray lines she’d inadvertently drawn into her work.

“What was it you wanted to ask?” Harry asked his brother.

“Right,” Monty said, watching Luna for a moment longer before turning away. “We’ve got to choose our subjects for third year, and I don’t know what to pick.”

Harry had to take a second to get his feelings in order. It would be very strange to Monty if he suddenly started crying. “I think the main question I have is, what do you want to do in the future? If there’s a certain job you want after Hogwarts, you’ll need the right N.E.W.T.s for it, and which N.E.W.T.s you take depends on what you get on your O.W.L.s in fifth year.”

“That’s the thing,” Monty said. “I have no idea what kind of jobs there even are. Percy—Ron’s brother—was really confusing.”

Harry smiled absently. “He would be, he’s going for twelve N.E.W.T.s. I bet your friend Granger is taking a leaf out of his book.”

“He said to play to my strengths,” Monty said. “But the only thing I’m good at is quidditch.”

“Do you want to play quidditch professionally?” Harry asked.

Monty shrugged.

“I don’t think that’s the only thing you’re good at,” Harry said. “You just happen to have a talent for flying. You were good at it right away. Developing a skill takes time. You can’t expect to be good at everything the first time you try it.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Monty said, frowning thoughtfully. “What subjects did you pick?”

“I picked Ancient Runes and Arithmancy,” Harry said. “I want to be a spellcrafter, or an artificer. Someone who makes magical objects,” he clarified, seeing Monty’s confusion. “So I picked those subjects with that in mind.”

Luna had stopped drawing again, and was now looking at Harry with a stricken expression.

“You want to invent magic,” she said.

“I do,” Harry agreed, watching her with concern.

“Mum did experimental magic,” Luna said quietly.

Harry stared at her as pieces started fitting together. Luna’s mother was dead. Luna could see thestrals, which implied she had seen her mother die. Her odd reaction to the silencing charm, her mother experimenting...

“I might end up doing something else,” Harry said gently. “With Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, I could also be a curse-breaker.”

Luna nodded, but still looked worried.

“Ron’s brother Bill is a curse-breaker,” Monty said. “It sounds really fun.”

“It does,” Harry agreed. “And Charlie works with dragons, right? At a dragon sanctuary? Something with creatures could be fun too. Luna’s dad searches for creatures.”

“I want to discover a new creature,” Luna said.

“So you’ll probably take Care for Magical Creatures once you’re a third-year, right?” Harry asked.

Luna smiled, though it was a bit off. “Professor Kettleburn knows Newt Scamander.”

“I think I’ve heard of him before,” Monty said uncertainly.

“He’s the one who wrote *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*,” Harry said.

Monty’s eyes lit up. “That’s right!”

“It’s a very good book,” Luna said. “It’s my favorite.”

Monty smiled at her. “I like it too. So,” he said, turning back to Harry, “I get what Ancient Runes is, it’s like a magical language?”

“Essentially,” Harry said.

“Then what’s Arithmancy? Is it just maths?”

“Not quite,” he said, leaning back. “It’s difficult to articulate, but you could call it magic using numbers. That covers a lot of things, by the way. But, to start off, it’s numerology. That’s assigning numerical values to words and sentences and doing some arithmetic, which gives you a number or numbers to interpret. Sort of like divination, or fortune telling, with numbers. That’s what the *mancy* part means. *Arith* for number, *mancy* for divination. The reason it’s useful for people who develop spells or potions is they can analyze their research using arithmancy and predict results, or identify what’s going wrong. It really depends on the number system, the language, how a statement is phrased, which makes it even more complicated. For example, it’s possible that most people developed base-ten—that’s counting up to ten then starting over again—because we’ve got ten fingers. But what if someone

counted the spaces *between* fingers? Then we'd be using base-eight. What if we had twelve fingers? Then it would be base-twelve. It would change everything."

Monty stared at him. "Um...so it's complicated maths?"

Harry laughed, feeling a little self-conscious. He really liked arithmancy. "The maths itself isn't very difficult early on. The hard part is wrapping your head around the connections between letters and numbers. And not just letters, anything can be defined mathematically."

"But that depends on the...base you use?" Monty asked. "So if we counted by eights instead, then things would add up differently?"

"It would look different, yeah," Harry said, rubbing his arm. "The thing is, magic in its purest form doesn't need wands or incantations."

Harry held out his hand and concentrated. Making fire so he could light the oven was something he had to do for years, out of pure necessity. A small flame appeared, and Monty's jaw dropped. Luna stopped drawing.

"The reason why we use those things," Harry said, shaking his hand and dispelling the small flame, "is that they are meaningful. When we use a word in English, we all understand what it means in context. Usually," he amended. "It's a convention. Sort of like..." Harry frowned, trying to think of something Monty might have learned. "Did you learn the order of operations in primary school?"

"Yeah," Monty said. "BOMDAS, right?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, that's a total fabrication. There's no reason, mathematically, *why* operations have to be in a particular order. We just agreed to do it so we'd all get the same answers. With magic, we do the same wand movements, incant the same words, and we end up casting the same spell. Of course, it's magic, so results vary."

Monty looked impressed. Or maybe he was bewildered, Harry wasn't sure.

He stood, gathering his work and stacking it neatly to the side. "Why don't we find some books on the third year subjects and you can see what piques your interest? I have friends in all the classes, so I know something about them all."

"Okay," Monty said, looking slightly relieved.

"I have a question," Luna said.

"Yeah?" Harry asked, wondering if he had inspired a passion for arithmancy in her.

"What's BOMDAS?"

Chapter End Notes

Some definitions so you don't have to look it up

res nullius - nobody's property. Like, wild animals are considered *res nullius*. If you "capture" it, it's yours.

caveat emptor - let the buyer beware. Basically, if you buy something that is defective, it's your own fault since you should've found that out before buying it. That's not been the case for a while in most places since there are consumer protection laws and stuff

volenti non fit iniuria - to a willing person, injury is not done. If you willingly put yourself in a position where you can get harmed, that's on you. It's not nearly that cut and dry in real life, though, there's different degrees of liability, and it has to be what a "reasonable" person (a legal fiction) considers a risk.

usufruct - the right to enjoy and profit from one's property, short of like, letting it go to shit or blowing it up. There's this case where a woman wanted her home demolished after her death, and they were like nah

BOMDAS - or PEMDAS, there are different mnemonics. Brackets/parentheses, orders/exponents (and roots), multiplication, division, addition, subtraction.

Here's some fun obscure math trivia. Exponents are also known as indices, and n th roots as surds. That square root symbol is called a surd (among other things). No one will ever know what you're talking about if you call it that.

The Werewolf's Lament

Chapter Summary

April/May 1993

Colin Creevey's return was ushered in with a feast. It had been months since anyone had seen the boy. Harry had no idea what to expect from his fellow petrification victim.

The small, mousey-haired boy came into the Great Hall with a contingent of his fellow Gryffindors, Ginny Weasley inexplicably at his side. He had a new camera, clutched in both hands as if it would protect him from the world. His previous one *had* protected him from a basilisk, so Harry couldn't fault his logic.

There was applause as Colin was welcomed back to Hogwarts, something which the school forewent for Harry. He didn't mind, he drew too much attention as it was. Colin had been petrified longer, too, had been out of school for months after he had been unpetrified, and was younger. And Colin was beaming at everything, delighted to be back at Hogwarts. That his parents had allowed him to return was interesting, though Harry could imagine not wanting to break the news to your child that they weren't allowed to learn magic anymore. It would be too cruel on top of his poor introduction to their world.

Harry had spent some time thinking about how unconcerned people had been about the petrification. The attack itself was what had upset them. But petrification? There were spells that caused it, potions that caused it, creatures that caused it. Petrification in and of itself wasn't the stuff of myths, like in the muggle world, some great tragedy to befall a person. It was quotidian. Injuries and illness were, in general, not taken as seriously because the solution was a wave of the wand and a few words away.

Harry had read about the history of quidditch—quidditch was so absurdly popular, so integral to so many lives, that it would have been foolish of him not to—and he knew how brutal variations of the game could be. Flying through burning barrels, exploding quaffles, flying facing backwards, catching boulders with a cauldron strapped to one's head. Violent, dangerous games. Blood sports. And the people loved it.

He listened as the headmaster gave his speech, as Colin was cheered again, watched piles of food manifest on the tables.

Injuries were easily mended. They didn't matter quite so much.

With the end of Easter holiday came the beginning of the gobstones tournament. Captain Lament, as she insisted upon being called, was the oldest player and it stood out. She didn't care, wearing her captain badge with pride as they walked to their first match.

Captain Lament froze in the doorway to the Great Hall.

"The spy," she growled, staring daggers at Luna. Luna waved at them. Harry lifted a hand in greeting.

"She did say she joined the Ravenclaw team," Harry said.

"Take no prisoners," Captain Lament said, marching to meet their enemies. "Evans, Avery. Steel your hearts. They may look sweet and innocent, but one false move and you'll get blasted in the face."

"Yes, captain," Killian said, sighing as Captain Lament stormed up to Professor Sprout, who was smiling and holding out a bag for the match selection. "I don't know how you put up with her, Harry."

"I think she's funny," he said, following his captain's lead.

In short order they were all settled down with their opponents. Harry was up against Michael Corner, a boy in Monty's year. Killian had it easy with Marcus Belby, who Harry hoped had a better showing than the previous year. He'd got sprayed by his own gobstone while scoring Harry points. The last, and most entertaining game, was Captain Lament and Luna.

Luna unpacked her set of gobstones from a box labeled *My First Gobstone Set - Gobstones, a Game For All Ages*. Captain Lament was mortally offended, which she said in as many words. Luna was unmoved, easily adding her moss agate gobstones to Professor Sprout's waiting hands.

Captain Lament, following the destruction of her previous set, had upgraded to ruby.

It was a staggering expenditure, at least five thousand galleons, not the kind of thing you'd see in a school game. Or the international circuit. It should have been on display somewhere.

"Knuckles down!" Professor Sprout called out.

Harry nodded to Corner, and the game began.

He didn't know if they were moving too fast or too slow, but when he found himself in the southeast belfry one night after curfew with Cedric's knee pressed between his legs, Harry thought he might be in over his head.

Harry pulled back to catch his breath. Cedric's head dropped to his shoulder.

"Cedric?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm not sure if..." Harry bit his lip, not knowing how to say it. "Is it okay if we slow down a bit?"

That didn't sound quite right either.

Cedric lifted his head, his expression troubled. "Am I pushing you? I didn't mean to. You're just so..." He sighed, then brushed Harry's cheek. "I'm not in a rush."

Once they had calmed down, Harry and Cedric walked over to the two brooms they'd got out of the broomshed. Harry had at first been confused as to the location of their rendezvous, seeing as both of their common rooms were subterranean and the dungeons were rife with readily available rooms. But then Cedric had taken his hand, made a mad dash across the grounds, and told Harry he wanted to go flying together.

Harry picked up the broom he'd taken, the old Moontrimmer, and left it hovering in the air so he could sit on it sidesaddle.

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone sit on a broom like that," Cedric said, mounting his Cleansweep Seven. Harry was surprised Cedric's dad hadn't splurged for a Nimbus. "I mean, I've seen pictures of my nan..."

"The cushioning charm's wearing off, and I don't fancy getting splinters up my arse," Harry said, shifting slightly.

Cedric laughed. "There's nothing wrong with it, it's just interesting."

"It's better than flying prone," Harry said, gesturing to Cedric bracing himself with his arms, legs dangling. Harry really couldn't understand sitting like that for hours, even with cushioning charms. "You know, lying forward like that. It might be better for speed and maneuverability, but I think this is more comfortable. Besides that, Luna's the one who showed me."

"That Ravenclaw who follows you around?"

Harry nodded, then looked out of the belfry. It was a pretty night. He understood why Cedric would want to go flying. "The moon is starting to set. Want to see how your Cleansweep holds up against a century-old Moontrimmer at high altitude?"

Luna had taken to sitting at every table except Hufflepuff. Harry thought someone—Flitwick, or perhaps a prefect—had encouraged her to take more meals with her fellow Ravenclaws, since she did have to live and take classes with them for seven years.

One morning in early May, an owl came for Luna, bearing a package. She immediately carried it over to the Slytherin table and plopped down to open it. It was the weekend, and the Great Hall was sparsely populated. Among his friends, only Cassius was up and functional.

“What’ve you got there?” Harry asked.

“My new gobstones set,” she said, unwrapping it.

“Right,” Harry said, glancing at Captain Lament as she tossed back a cup of coffee. Those ruby gobstones were no joke. Luna’s poor moss agate had been pulverized. Charity had to buy Luna a new set out of pocket. Harry was of the opinion that N.E.W.T.s were getting to her.

“What kind did you get?” he asked.

“Kyanite in marble,” she said, showing off a striated gobstone in cream-colored marble, embedded with columnar crystals of sky blue.

“It matches your eyes,” Harry said, watching as Luna held one up to her eye for comparison.

“Are you looking forward to the quidditch match?” she asked, lowering the gobstone.

“He’s looking forward to quidditch being over,” Cassius said from behind his *Daily Prophet*. “Have you read the article on the new werewolf legislation?”

“Anti-werewolf legislation,” Harry corrected. “And no. I didn’t want to lose my appetite.”

“It was written by Dolores Umbridge,” Cassius said, indifferent to Harry’s weak stomach.

“Who?”

“Precisely,” Cassius said. “I never heard of her before she joined the Wizengamot.”

“That’s right, the special election,” Harry said, struggling to remember that article. It was a real blink-and-you-miss-it thing.

“Maybe Adrian knows something,” Cassius suggested.

Harry sat upright. “No, I remember. She was involved in that Rufus Fudge shitshow, yeah?”

He pulled his copy of the *Daily Prophet* from under Luna’s gobstones, which she had been arranging in a pyramid, and found the article. “Here it is. She’s the Head of the Improper Use of Magic Office. She must have swept it under the rug. He got a suspension instead of being sacked, and who knows how many muggles vanished along with that train.”

Cassius shook his head. “Cronyism.”

“Must be,” Harry said, reading Umbridge’s Lycanthropic Laborers Act.

“Daddy says the Ministry covers up a lot of things,” Luna said sagely. “Like heliopaths.”

“Reckon so,” Harry said. “Listen to this. Werewolves have to register their status with the Ministry, okay, that’s been the case for a while. Is there a new procedure? They have to prove they have no pack affiliation, and submit themselves to Wolfsbane testing. How’s that meant to work? They can’t afford Wolfsbane if they haven’t got a job!”

“Not only that,” Cassius said, setting his paper down. “They want to freeze their Gringotts accounts.”

“Is that even possible?” Harry asked. “I thought Gringotts was sovereign?”

“The Ministry can *say* they're doing things at Gringotts,” Cassius said. “It’s not like the goblins will listen.”

Harry was still thinking about the anti-werewolf law during the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff gobstones match. He was there taking notes for Captain Lament, who really did need to study for N.E.W.T.s. She’d been working on some application for weeks, but wouldn’t tell anyone what for. It seemed that it was contingent on her grades.

Cedric was there too, supporting his friends on the team. Hannah Abbott, a well-disposed girl in Monty’s year. Haruka Endo, the girl who, like many others, fancied Cedric. And, to Harry’s surprise, Michael McManus, a fifth-year and a beater on the Hufflepuff team.

Harry didn’t care for McManus, and was glad Lee Jordan was up against him.

Tension between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff had been ramping up since the end of Easter holiday. Whoever won the quidditch game between them got the Quidditch Cup. He wasn’t particularly looking forward to the game. Harry knew he should support Cedric, it was the only socially acceptable choice he could make. But, he wanted Gryffindor to win.

“You’re quiet,” Cedric said, bumping shoulders with him.

“I’m always quiet,” Harry said. “Except when I’m not.”

Cedric blinked at him. “Right. Are you okay? Worried about the competition?”

“What competition?” Harry asked, not sure what Cedric was talking about. Neville Longbottom scored a point against Hannah Abbott, reprising their game from the last tournament. Harry made a note.

“Never mind,” Cedric said with a laugh.

“I was just thinking about the werewolf thing in the *Prophet* today,” Harry said.

“Oh, that,” Cedric said. “I say it’s about time.”

Harry was glad he was taking notes for Captain Lament. It gave him an excuse to not respond right away. “What do you mean?”

“Well, werewolves are dangerous,” Cedric said.

“During the full moon,” Harry said, glancing at Cedric.

“Not just then,” Cedric said. “Dad’s been part of the Werewolf Capture Unit, in the Beast Division.”

“Beast,” Harry repeated dully.

“It’s dangerous work, even when it’s not the full moon. Werewolves are strong as anything, and vicious.”

“Cedric, they’re *people*,” Harry said. “People who’ve been infected with lycanthropy.”

“It doesn’t seem like it when they fight back,” Cedric said bluntly.

“Fighting back against the Ministry trying to capture them,” Harry said. “For the crime of being a werewolf.”

“For being a threat,” Cedric said, frowning. “They don’t go after random werewolves.”

Harry shook his head. “No, it’s pretty clear lycanthropy is being criminalized. They’re punishing werewolves for simply being werewolves. Like anyone had a choice about it.”

Cedric didn’t respond, a strange look on his face. The clatter of gobstones and sounds of disgust reminded Harry of where he was and what he was supposed to be doing.

“Oh, well done, Mr. Longbottom!” Professor Flitwick exclaimed, hurrying over to help Hannah Abbott clean up.

Harry swore under his breath. “I can’t believe I missed the final point.”

Since Slytherin was out of the running for the Quidditch Cup, they had thrown their lackluster support behind Hufflepuff. Harry was content to sit in the stands and watch how things played out. If people assumed he was for Hufflepuff because he happened to be dating the team’s seeker, so be it. The idea that any Slytherin would root for Gryffindor, in any capacity, was laughable. Of the people who knew him, he suspected only Luna and his Dad knew the truth.

“He’s so much better than last year,” Terence said. Harry watched Monty weaving through the other players, leading Cedric on a merry chase. “Diggory’s totally off his game.”

Astrid snorted. “Wood taught him the definition of *feint*.”

Harry saw her fists were balled in her robes, and that Astrid wasn’t watching the seekers at all, focused instead on the Gryffindor chasers as Alicia Spinnet scored another goal.

Monty rose above the other players, pausing mid air for several moments, then suddenly dove.

“Potter’s spotted the snitch!” Lee Jordan announced excitedly. “Or is it another feint? No, ladies and gentlemen! Diggory’s hot on his heels...”

“Monty is quite good at this,” Luna whispered.

Harry smiled as his brother won the game. There was a collective groan of disappointment from his fellow Slytherins. “He is.”

The quidditch fever was replaced with exam anxiety as finals neared. Harry hadn’t been sure what to do in the wake of Hufflepuff’s defeat, but Cedric was a good sport. It did seem like Cedric had wanted to impress him, and that Harry’s role as his boyfriend was to comfort him in his time of need.

There was gobstones, too, but even Captain Lament had to devote some time to her studies, and her fervor had marginally dampened, trusting Harry and Killian to hold their own against Hufflepuff. Cedric was in the audience again, and Harry hid a smile as he wiped the floor with Haruka Endo. He wondered if Cedric got as much flak from his friends about *divided loyalties*.

Cedric didn’t seem very divided when he gave Harry a congratulatory snog.

The *Daily Prophet* had shifted focus while the Muggle Protection Act was stuck in committee. The Lycanthropic Laborers Act was their new political target, and was met with positive opinions from the public.

Harry had wanted to talk to Cedric about it again, but suspected he’d only get more of Amos Diggory’s watered down opinions. That Cedric called werewolves *beasts*, and seemed to honestly believe they were feral subhumans—Harry blamed *Wanderings with Werewolves*

and Lockhart's propensity to pontificate on matters he knew fuck all about—sat poorly with Harry. He couldn't expect him and Cedric to agree on everything.

His dad was busy preparing for exams. Harry hadn't even seen him at meals, and during class his dad had got more snappish. Harry knew his dad taught ten pre-O.W.L. classes and three N.E.W.T.-level ones, which was a considerable amount of work. He didn't want to add onto it by demanding attention.

Privately, he was also worried what his dad's opinion would be.

Behind a one-way silencing charm, learned specifically so Harry could listen to his roommates without disturbing them with his hurdy-gurdying, Harry rolled his eyes at Adrian's latest brag.

"I could!" Adrian said defensively. "If Lockhart could, it can't be that hard."

"If Lockhart's actually beaten a werewolf I'll eat my broom," Terence said. "You? Against a werewolf?"

"I bet you've never even met one before," Cassius said, tossing some bones on his bed. Harry had given him the human knuckle bones he'd bought in Diagon Alley, but osteomancy wasn't in the Divination curriculum. Most magic involving human body parts was considered dark, as far as Harry could tell. Cassius kept it in the dormitory.

"What do you think, Haz?" Adrian asked. "Me up against a werewolf?"

Harry snorted. "Maybe one of those kids in Knockturn."

"We can't hear you," Cassius said.

"I think he said *let's talk about the new brooms coming out*," Terence said with a grin.

Harry gave him two fingers and dispelled his silencing charm. "I said Adrian could probably take a kid werewolf. You know, someone without a wand."

"Think they call them cubs?" Terence asked.

Harry made a face. "You know they're humans, right? With a disease?"

"Yeah, we've heard," Adrian said, exasperated. "Bleeding heart."

"An adult werewolf on a full moon?" Harry said. "Not a chance."

"Says you," Adrian said.

“Says him and anyone with common sense,” Cassius said.

“If Adrian hasn’t got it, it can’t be that common,” Terence quipped.

“If they’re so dangerous, why doesn’t the Ministry just *give* them Wolfsbane?” Adrian said mockingly, sticking his tongue out at Harry.

“I could start playing this any time,” Harry said, pressing the keys of his hurdy-gurdy. “I’ll even compose a song. The Werewolf’s Lament.”

Adrian snickered. “Don’t let your captain hear that one.”

This was it. The last gobstones game of the year. Everything they had fought for, the blood, sweat, tears, unidentifiable fluids, it all came down to this.

“Come on, Captain,” Tracey said, wringing her hands. The entire Slytherin team had turned out.

“You can do it, Cap,” Vince said. Draco, who had come along with him, rolled his eyes, while Greg laughed like a drain at Kenneth Towler getting sprayed in the face like a misbehaving cat.

The two firsties, Ethan and Bridget, were huddled around Harry. He imagined the Heir of Slytherin business had been the worst for them, barring himself, Colin Creevey, and Mrs. Norris. What a way to start your career at Hogwarts, a basilisk in the walls and the entire castle turned against you.

Captain Lament was resplendent for her final game of gobstones at Hogwarts. Blood red robes to match her ruby gobstones, a second set Harry could not divine the purpose of, captain and prefect badges luminous under the candlelight of the Great Hall, hair caked with orange goo.

Killian had his eyes closed, muttering under his breath. Luna was floating in midair among the Gryffindors. Harry hadn’t been too surprised to see Monty there, given his friend Neville was on the team, and he’d dragged Ron and Hermione along with him. Nor Fred and George, since their mate Lee Jordan was as well. Percy and Ginny were more surprising, but Harry was too practiced at gobstones to let it affect him. He practiced five days a week, something he wouldn’t be changing once he made captain. He’d worked out Charity’s motives. She might have been a gobstones fanatic, but it wasn’t just about gobstones.

Harry’s dad was there, too. He was glad his dad had taken the time to spectate, given how absent he’d been around the castle of late. Harry was concerned there was something else going on, maybe about the diary or the Chamber of Secrets, or some new threat he hadn’t been apprised of.

Kenneth only had one gobstone left. His set lay broken and discarded around him, fallen in combat. That was one way to make gobstones even less popular, have them explode.

Captain Lament had laser focus as she pressed her knuckles against the floor. Her knuckles were scraped and bleeding from her vigorous game play, but it was all worth it. Her bottle-washer glowed with some odious vermillion concoction, and with a flick of her thumb it sped towards Kenneth's lone gobstone, slamming into it with a final *crack* that echoed throughout the Great Hall.

The crowd clapped politely.

"And the game goes to Miss Lament," Professor Sprout said cheerily.

"That's Captain Lament," Professor Snape said, crossing his arms. He looked exhausted, but pleased by the outcome.

For Captain Lament, it was like a dam had broken. She was bent over, weeping, and Harry walked forward to comfort her. She lunged up and seized him.

"When you were petrified," she sobbed, "I thought that was it for us. But we did it, Evans. We did it!"

Harry patted her back as the rest of their team surrounded them. Charity sniffed, then pushed him away so she could accept the gobstones trophy. She blinked away tears as she held it up for the twenty or so people in attendance to see, then handed it to an overwhelmed Killian.

"There's one last thing I must do," Charity said, "my final duty as your captain."

Harry watched, dumbfounded, as Charity removed her captain badge and pinned it to his robes.

"My time is over," Charity said, putting her hands on Harry's shoulders. "May Her spirit live on in you. Avery, the set."

Killian passed the trophy to Tracey, who stared at it in awe, then picked up Charity's second set. He soberly carried it over to Harry, and at a touch from Charity it opened to reveal a set of sunstones.

"We all chipped in," Killian said, giving him a small smile. "You can't play with quartz forever, Harry."

Harry accepted the new gobstones, captivated by the transparent orange and green stones flecked with scintillating grains of copper. "Thank you. I don't know what to say."

Captain Lament wiped her eyes. "It's all up to you, Evans. I know you'll make me proud."

She saluted him, turned, then walked out of the Great Hall.

"Captain, where are you going?" Tracey asked, still holding the trophy.

Captain Lament kept walking through the entrance hall, then out of the castle.

“Charity,” Harry called out, “seriously, where are you going? Your N.E.W.T.s start tomorrow!”

Holibobs

Chapter Summary

June 1993

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

News of a goblin riot broke the morning of their first exam day.

“You can’t just write as fast as you can then piss off,” Astrid said.

Harry watched a grinning goblin with a wand turn a bin into something that looked like a lean brown cow, which then leapt out of frame.

“Yeah?” Adrian said. “Haz does it!”

“Harry’s Harry,” Phoebe said. “He hates taking exams.”

“So do I!” Adrian said. “It drives me up the wall, sitting there for hours, bored out of my skull.”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Harry said absently, reading through the article. “It’s O.W.L.s that do. Save your energy for that.”

“That’s a year off,” Phoebe said disapprovingly. “How will he learn the material if he skives off now?”

Goblin Riots Erupt in Chipping Clodbury

Representatives from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures met with leaders of the Brotherhood of Goblins, which the Ministry has now designated a terrorist organization, to discuss the proposed Goblin Bill of Rights. During talks, supporters of the B.O.G. ran rampant through the quiet market town, using stolen wands to create small explosions and transfigure various objects into what sources say are wildebeests.

“I thought we were getting along fine until I heard the first explosion,” says Ministry delegate Royden Poke.

“It’s Defense first,” Terence said consolingly. “You just need to remember which potions Lockhart uses in his hair.”

“He’s not *that* bad,” Phoebe said with a frown. “I thought you liked him too!”

“That was before we had him for a year.”

Cedric caught up with him that afternoon, after his Ancient Runes exam. Harry had been sitting in one of the courtyards talking to Jasmine and Cassius about one of the questions, which he was worried he had mistranslated.

“Harry,” Cedric said, walking up to him. “How was your exam?”

“Oh, don’t encourage him,” Jasmine said. “He’s only been going on about it for ages. We’ve got Transfiguration to worry about.”

“Do you need to study?” Cedric asked.

Cassius snorted.

Harry scowled at him, then smiled up at Cedric. “No, I’ve got time.”

“Brilliant,” Cedric said. “Want to pop down to the kitchens?”

Harry said goodbye to his friends and followed Cedric back into the castle.

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

Cedric smiled down at him. “No, I just wanted to spend some time with you.”

Entering the kitchens sent the house-elves aflutter.

“Just tea and biscuits, thanks,” Cedric said to one of them, pulling a seat out for Harry.

“Thanks,” Harry said, accepting a cup of tea from an elf.

“So,” Cedric said. “You’ve seen the news today?”

“I have,” Harry said, watching Cedric curiously.

“That thing with the wildebeests?”

Harry took a sip of tea. “You mean the Chipping Clodbury riot? The Goblin Bill of Rights?”

Cedric rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. I was wondering what you think about it?”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Well, there’s a lot to say, isn’t there? It’s obviously a reaction to that new anti-werewolf law. They goblins have been trying to get wand rights for nearly three hundred years, and now the Ministry’s trying to regulate who they do business with in their own territory.”

Cedric frowned. “But those were stolen wands. And they used them to blow up post boxes.”

“I think goblins could manage that without wands,” Harry said. “Muggles can. They sell fireworks at Zonko’s, put enough together and you could blow something up.”

Cedric closed his eyes, then said, “My dad was at that meeting.”

“Oh,” Harry said, slightly chastened. “Is he alright?”

“Yeah, the explosions happened outside,” Cedric said. “Some shrubbery, I think.”

“And a shed,” Harry said. “I don’t necessarily agree with their methods, but I think the Brotherhood of Goblins has some valid points. Why shouldn’t goblins have wands?”

“Because they do stuff like this?” Cedric said. “My mum says you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

“How has that worked out?” Harry said. “They’ve been managing our money for centuries. The only time they’ve fought us is for more rights. No, the reason wands are restricted to humans—very *particular* humans—is because it’s a way to control them. And us, too,” Harry added. “I never got notices for underage magic before I started Hogwarts.”

“You’ve got a warning?” Cedric asked.

Harry shook his head. “Yes, but that’s not my point.”

“Goblins are dangerous,” Cedric said definitively.

“Yeah?” Harry said. “Well, so are we. We have a spell literally called *The Killing Curse*. Should we do away with wands all together, then?”

“No,” Cedric said, “but that doesn’t mean we should be giving them out to anyone who asks.”

Harry sighed. “Why did you want to talk about this?”

“You care about stuff like this, right?” Cedric said. “I see you reading the *Prophet* every morning.”

Harry blushed. “You watch me during breakfast?”

Cedric leaned forward. “You’re really cute. You get this really intense look.”

Just then, the portrait to the kitchen was flung open, and Fred and George tumbled in. Cedric flinched away, grimacing.

“Look at that, Georgie,” George said, in a blatant attempt to make Harry and Cedric confused about who was who. “We’ve interrupted their date!”

“Go on, Diggory,” Fred said with a lascivious grin. “Don’t hold back on our account.”

“Manfred,” Harry said, looking at Fred. “Georgius. Fancy seeing you two here.”

“First name basis, is it?” George said, sitting down next to him, Fred on Cedric’s other side.

“Bikkies?” Fred said, taking one. “Don’t mind if I do.”

Cedric chuckled awkwardly. “You two ready for Transfiguration tomorrow?”

“No,” the twins said, sharing a grin.

Cedric sought Harry’s hand under the table and gave it a squeeze.

“What about Defense?” Harry asked. He avoided talking to people about Potions. Barely anyone had a kind word outside of Slytherin, though Luna was enjoying herself.

George laughed.

“As long as we remember his favorite color is lilac,” Fred said, “we’ll be fine.”

“Are you ready, Severus?”

Severus stood in the headmaster’s office, having watched the man fiddle with one of his silver instruments for nearly an hour, only telling Severus he was *calibrating it*.

“I do have marking to do,” Severus said. Finals had ended the day before, though N.E.W.T.s were still in progress. He was curious how Harry had done, and to some extent the Lovegood girl now that her potions were no longer being tampered with. He knew turning a blind eye to the sabotage that occurred in his class was dangerous for the students, and yet he had let it persist for years. That a teenager had inadvertently shamed him into putting a stop to it...

“I *was* a professor once, you know,” Dumbledore said with a slight smile. “I always found marking delightful. The students come up with such cleverly incorrect answers.”

“Then you understand why I am so eager to return to the task,” Severus said drily.

Dumbledore chuckled. “Very well. We’ll be using the floo to Arabella’s home. Number 7 Privet Drive.”

Dumbledore walked to the fireplace, the instrument tucked in his robes, and vanished in a burst of green flames. Severus sighed, then followed suit.

He found himself stepping into a dim living room filled with cats. It smelled like cats. There was cat hair everywhere. Furniture was scratched up. Pictures of cats covered walls and shelves, mostly static but some magical. Cats were meowing. A small, elderly woman with a nest of grey hair and light coating of cat fur on her pink dressing gown was smiling warmly at Dumbledore.

"It's so good to see you, Arabella," Dumbledore said.

"Likewise, headmaster," the woman croaked. "Mind the cats, Tufty's just given birth."

"Ah, the beauty of new life," Dumbledore said, smiling broadly. "Severus, this is Mrs. Arabella Figg, a long time acquaintance of mine."

"Severus Snape," he said, stepping forward to shake the woman's hand. Who knew where it had been. Playing midwife to cats, no doubt. "Charmed."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, professor," Mrs. Figg said. "Would you stay for tea?"

"Unfortunately, we have Hogwarts business to attend to," Dumbledore said. "Perhaps another time? I recall a delectable chocolate cake of yours I was rather fond of."

Mrs. Figg giggled. "The door's just this way."

Severus left the house with absolutely no desire to return.

"Arabella has been watching over Monty since I first brought him here," Dumbledore said. It was late afternoon. The Dursleys were away picking their son up from his boarding school, Smeltings. They crossed Privet Drive, looking entirely out of place but unobservable to any muggle watchers. Severus looked at Number 4, and paused in the middle of the street when he noticed bars had been installed over one of the windows.

Dumbledore didn't seem to notice. Severus doubted he'd returned to this place after dumping Potter off with Petunia.

"We will need to store it in a place Monty's family won't think to look," Dumbledore said, pulling out another trinket of his to unlock the front door. With another, a glowing ball of light appeared.

"There appears to be a cupboard under the staircase," Severus said, once again entering Petunia's home.

"Or perhaps in Monty's room," Dumbledore said, unlocking the cupboard. "Though that may necessitate telling him."

The cupboard door opened, revealing the same thin mattress and tatty blanket.

Dumbledore stared at it.

"I didn't think muggles had house-elves," Severus said.

“I don’t believe they do, Severus,” Dumbledore said quietly. “It seems this cupboard has gone unused for some time. Ah, there’s a shelf I can set the Domestic Disturbance Detector on.”

“It has a name?” Severus asked, watching Dumbledore set an overly complicated tuning fork on a small, dusty shelf. A spider scuttled away.

“Perhaps we should explore the rest of the house,” Severus said. “I find it unusual that one window has bars while the others do not.”

Dumbledore shut the cupboard, his hand resting on the padlock. Severus rolled his eyes and started upstairs, Dumbledore following silently behind.

“It seems there are three bedrooms,” Severus said. “Presumably one of these belongs to Potter.”

He walked to the one with a lock on it. He noticed more locks had been added, and a cat flap had been installed.

“How interesting. This door has a cat flap. As I recall, Petunia is allergic to cats.”

He glanced at Dumbledore, and saw the headmaster staring at the door to Potter’s room. He looked up at Severus with a weary face.

“I am aware of what Monty has said to others about his life here,” Dumbledore said. “I did not doubt his words. This, however, is beyond what I expected.”

“That woman has been watching the boy for twelve years,” Severus said acidly.

“Not closely enough, it seems,” Dumbledore said, unlocking the many locks on Potter’s door.

There had been no change in the room since Severus had last seen it, other than it was much filthier.

“This isn’t fit for a child,” he said, kicking one of the myriad broken items littering the floor. “Alternative living arrangements must be made.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “The spell I cast on Monty requires him to live here.”

“Albus, there is a *cat flap* on the door, in a home with no cats! Can you not grasp what that is for? Does this look like a *home* to you?”

Dumbledore sighed. “Lily has no other living relatives. As long as Monty calls this *home*, Lord Voldemort cannot reach him here. Unless you know something I don’t, Severus?”

“No,” he said flatly. “How long must the boy stay here?”

“As long as he can endure,” Dumbledore said sadly.

Severus shook his head, appalled. Even he had a nicer room as a child.

Dumbledore had put Potter in this place. He could live with the consequences of his own actions.

“Sadly, Gilderoy will not be returning next year as he will be traveling to Canada to begin his next book.”

“Thank you, headmaster,” Lockhart said, standing. Every time Harry had seen the man, he had been wearing different robes, and the end-of-year feast was no exception

“My next work is titled *Wintering with Wendigos*,” Lockhart said, drawing reluctant applause.

“That was my idea,” Harry muttered.

“I imagine everything in his books was someone else’s idea,” Cassius said.

The feast was, as always, impressive. Harry didn’t have much of an appetite, pushing around the food on his plate. After final exams, there had been two weeks left in the school year. Two weeks where he hadn’t managed to talk to Percy once.

It hadn’t been a *bad* two weeks. He’d played a few games of gobstones with Charity, his captain badge proudly displayed for her benefit. He’d watched his friends play quidditch, flown a few times himself, sat by the Black Lake, snuck into the kitchens, lurked in the library, talked about what they were all doing for the holiday. He’d got notes from Monty, and some from Luna that contained drawings she had done of the strange creatures only she could see. Luna was traveling with her father. Most of his friends were going abroad; international travel wasn’t nearly as expensive for magical people as muggles.

Monty was going back to the Dursleys.

Harry had approached his dad, who assured him measures had been put in place to ensure his brother was safe. What those entailed, Harry didn’t know, but he trusted his dad.

“Any plans for the holibobs?” Burbage asked while doing something highly questionable to a baked potato.

“I beg your pardon,” Severus said. “I don’t speak *insipid*.”

“It’s adorbs malorbs,” Burbage said, scraping the inside of the potato, leaving the skin folded over on itself.

“I can assure you it is not,” he said, turning to scan the room. After nearly ten months surrounded by teenagers, day in and day out, he needed silence. Absolute silence.

“I beg your indulgence,” Burbage said gravely as she continued playing with her food. “Have you got anything planned for the holidays?”

“I find that rather defeats the purpose,” Severus said absently. “I’ll be brewing potions.”

“The same thing you do every day,” Burbage said, nodding.

“Someone has to restock the infirmary,” he said. “It is part of my duties as Potions Master.”

“Lucky you,” Burbage said, vigorously cracking pepper over her food. “I’ve got to find better books for my classes, or bite the bullet and write one myself.”

Severus cut a chunk from his roast and stared at the glistening meat. “Technically, assigning books is not required. You could, for example, make copies of articles and distribute them in class.”

“Oh?” Burbage said, looking up at him with a smile. He noticed she had dimples. He had no idea why that detail stood out to him. “That’s brilliant! It’ll save the students money too. I’ve got a few muggleborns signed up for third year. I reckon they’d get a laugh out of the current texts.”

“I take points for any laughter in class,” he said.

Burbage snorted. “What a surprise. God forbid learning is fun. It’s only *magic*.”

She shoved a glob of potato into her mouth, and Severus turned back to his own food.

Harry knew why he had agreed to this, but at the same time he had no idea why he had agreed to this.

Sharing a compartment with Cedric and his friends was about as uncomfortable as he had expected it to be. He couldn’t see himself putting Cedric through the same thing. While Harry’s friends were generally nice, a few were an acquired taste. Phoebe was almost as peculiar as Luna, and her painted chorus frog was a constant, croaking companion. Harry barely paid attention to the little amphibian anymore, relegating the croaks to background noise. Jasmine was incisive, despite or because of her innocent exterior. Terence would probably get on with Cedric. They could talk about quidditch. Harry didn’t think Cedric would understand Adrian, or Cassius, or even Astrid.

Benjy nibbled on his hair, unseen by everyone else in the compartment.

As he smiled at another incomprehensible inside joke, pressed against Cedric's side, Harry imagined this was what an accessory felt like. He wasn't *Harry*, he was *Cedric's boyfriend*, or whatever other label they attached to him.

He realized, with abrupt clarity, that he didn't have to stay there. He could leave any time. He didn't have to spend eight hours in an overfull compartment with people he didn't know and didn't really like. Had they forgotten he was petrified? Had they forgotten the things they had said?

Harry nudged Cedric, getting his attention for the first time in what felt like hours. "I need the bog," he muttered.

Cedric nodded distractedly, and Harry slowly got up, eased the compartment door open, and slipped into the corridor. He sighed in relief, then pressed himself against the wall as a few kids sprinted past, slamming open the doors between cars, casting spells in the short time they had before the holiday.

"No running in the corridor!" a familiar voice shouted.

"Shame you can't take points, eh?" he said, grinning at Percy, who had stormed in from the next car over.

"Evans," he said with a nod. "I made that complaint last year, to no avail. There is no authority without coercion."

"I don't think punishment is the best way to get the results you want," Harry said.

Percy pushed up his glasses. Harry wondered if his family could afford a new pair, then felt guilty for the thought. Percy could transfigure the frames if he wanted to.

"Perhaps not," Percy said. "But in this context, I believe it is. Trial and error has demonstrated that asking nicely comes to naught."

"Your siblings?" Harry guessed.

"Just so," Percy said. "If you'll excuse me, I do need to make some attempt to establish order."

Percy began walking away.

It was the first time Harry had spoken to him in weeks.

"Can I owl you over holiday?" Harry asked, a little loudly.

Percy paused, then turned back to look at Harry.

"I've been wondering what your thoughts are on some recent events," Harry said.

Percy shut his eyes briefly, then nodded. “You needn’t ask, but of course you may.”

“*May* I, right,” Harry muttered. “Good luck catching recalcitrants.”

Percy smiled faintly, then turned away again, walking into the next car. The doors shut behind him.

Harry slumped against the wall, listening to the laughter coming from Cedric’s compartment. He shook his head, then went in search of his friends. He could think of an excuse for Cedric later.

Monty wanted to say goodbye to Harry, but knew the older boy wouldn’t appreciate being approached in public. So instead he watched as Harry said goodbye to his Slytherin friends, then as he looked uncomfortable being introduced to Cedric Diggory’s parents, particularly Diggory’s loud father. Monty hadn’t known boys were allowed to date each other, but no one seemed to mind it very much so he assumed it was normal in the wizarding world. And normal in the muggle one too; he’d heard his Uncle Vernon talk about *nancy boys*, not wanting Dudley to turn into one, as if there was any chance of that. Monty assumed that anything the Dursleys did or said was categorically wrong. They’d probably hate someone like Harry, and not only for being a wizard.

Once past the barrier, Monty saw to his dismay that Uncle Vernon was waiting for him, looking nervously around. He said his final goodbyes to his friends, giving Ron and Hermione the Dursleys’ phone number. He watched Harry walk out of the station, without a bulky trunk like most everyone else. He’d probably shrunk it again. His little thestral was perched on his head, looking around with as much interest a toy could have.

Swallowing nervously, Monty dragged his trunk over to his uncle.

“There you are, boy,” Uncle Vernon said, glaring down at him.

Monty hated the Dursleys. He didn’t want to go back. Ron said he could stay over during the holiday again, but Monty didn’t want to impose. He doubted he’d be allowed to stay with Hermione’s family, given she was a girl and her parents didn’t know him. There was Neville, but Monty wasn’t as close to him, and his gran sounded scary. And Luna, but she was going to Senegal with her dad. Or maybe Singapore, or both. Her dad sounded a bit disorganized.

Maybe he could stay with Harry?

Smiling to himself, Monty watched as Uncle Vernon strained to get his trunk into the boot, then obediently piled in next to a sweaty Dudley, who inched away from him. His Aunt Petunia also looked shaken. He had no idea what was going on with them. They knew he couldn’t do magic outside of school, they’d seen the letter from the Ministry.

Chalking it up to some strange new Dursley-ish phenomenon, Monty buckled himself in. Uncle Vernon pulled into traffic, laying on the horn, and the London streets slowly passed by.

Monty sat up when he saw a boy, dressed in all black, walking down the street towards the Leaky Cauldron. Where was Harry going?

The Knight Bus! That had to be it. Why would Harry bother taking muggle trains north when he could get there faster?

Leaning back in his seat, Monty wondered if summoning the Knight Bus counted as underage magic. He'd have to ask Harry that in his next letter.

Chapter End Notes

That's it, that's the Chamber of Secrets

Sealskin

Chapter Summary

June 1993

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Severus made a slow circuit of the Restricted Section as he recalled the look on Petunia's face when she arrived home and found two *freaks* waiting for her.

"You did not do as I asked. You have not treated him as your own."

He didn't have much to work on. He knew Potter had to call that place *home*. He knew it had to do with Lily's *blood*. He knew that Dumbledore had cast some sort of charm. That kind of familial magic was ancient, obscure, though not so much that the headmaster hadn't known of it.

"Your sister gave her life to save her son."

Severus didn't know if Petunia was capable of guilt, but she was certainly capable of fear.

Smiling to himself, he continued searching through the shelves.

The Dursleys were acting decidedly odd.

In the past, when Monty had suggested they leave him at home when they went on holiday, or when they took Dudley out for his birthday, instead of sticking him with Mrs. Figg, they had shot him down. They thought he'd blow up the house, which was a slightly more sensible fear now that Monty knew he had magic. Before then, he'd just thought the Dursleys were off their rockers. They still were, but at least there was an explanation.

Monty had felt some trepidation upon returning to Privet Drive. There were holes around the window of Dudley's second bedroom, which Uncle Vernon had given a dark look. The door to the bedroom had a square hole at the bottom, but the lock had been removed. In fact, it looked like there had been more locks screwed in, but none actually on the door. The strangest thing of all was he was allowed to keep all of his school things.

He had been prepared. He still had that lockpick someone had sent him, and he was not above stealing food from the fridge.

Aunt Petunia had told him in a tight voice that he was allowed to send letters to his friends, but said he ought to do it when it wasn't daylight so the neighbors wouldn't notice. Monty couldn't argue, given the Statute of Secrecy. It was common sense.

He watched the Dursleys drive away in Uncle Vernon's brand new company car, for the first time in his life leaving him alone at the house. They were off to do something for Dudley's birthday. Monty had never given his cousin a present—why bother when it would never be reciprocated, and it wasn't as if he'd had money to buy anything worthy of Diddykins—but he considered not being carted along with the Dursleys a decent gift, for both of them.

Monty sat back down at Dudley's old desk. He had an assignment on shrinking potions to write.

Harry frowned at the collection of bubbling cauldrons he'd been told to look after. It was dull work, but necessary. His dad said he had business at Hogwarts, and trusted Harry enough to manage the lab on his own.

Sighing, he sat down on a stool and pulled out the letter he had got that morning. It was barely a week into the holiday, he hadn't expected anything so soon. People were spending time with their families, getting used to life outside of Hogwarts. Cedric had told him at Kings Cross that his dad had taken leave after the traumatizing experience of seeing a goblin set a shrub on fire. They were on a family holiday.

Harry didn't like Amos Diggory. Cedric's mum, Wenna, was a perfectly nice woman, who had no need to comment on the gender of who her son chose to date. Harry got the impression that, while homosexuality was generally accepted in the British magical community, it was the sort of thing where it was okay for other people's children but not one's own.

But he wasn't dating Amos Diggory, thank fuck. He was dating Cedric.

The letter was from Monty, who had written to him after his friend Ron had called the Dursleys' house phone.

Dear Harry,

How has your holiday been so far? I've been working on the assignment from Professor Snape. It's about shrinking potions. He wants us to list all the side-effects of the potion being brewed incorrectly, which is taking ages. Do you know anything about rat spleens?

Ron tried calling the house earlier today, which is why I've been sent to my room. Not that I'd want to be in the rest of the house, and it's much better than being locked in my room. Anyway, I should have explained to Ron how to use a phone. He was yelling the whole time. It was pretty funny, you should've seen Uncle Vernon's face!

Do you know if summoning the Knight Bus counts as underage magic?

Have you heard from Luna at all? I've got a postcard from her from Sri Lanka. I thought she was going to Saint Lucia?

I've asked Hedwig to wait for a reply.

Best,

Monty

Harry folded the letter back up then checked the temperature on all of the cauldrons. The potion still needed to reduce for an hour, so he found some clear space on a table to compose his reply.

Rat spleens, the Knight Bus...he thought Luna was going to Samoa.

Shaking his head, he started to write.

Filibusters at the Wizengamot

Tiberius Ogden, esteemed senior member of the Wizengamot and owner of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey, set off a display of Dr. Filibuster's Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks in an attempt to delay a vote on the Lycanthropic Laborers Act. For more on the Act, see page 3.

Chambers were evacuated as the display continued for several hours. Once the session had recommenced, Mr. Ogden told his fellow members an anecdote about his great-great-granddaughter, whose favorite color is purple and who has recently had her first display of accidental magic: turning Mr. Ogden's hair purple.

Harry laughed at the picture of the Wizengamot's chambers filled with fireworks, pinging off the walls, setting things on fire. One knocked Dolores Umbridge's hat off.

"What has you so amused?" his dad asked.

Harry set down the *Prophet*. “Do you think they’ll pass that werewolf thing?”

His dad’s lips thinned. “It is probable. Following the collapse of the Dark Lord’s faction, which many werewolves were associated with, anti-werewolf sentiment began to rise. There are several notorious werewolves which did little to advance their cause. One of the Dark Lord’s more zealous followers, Fenrir Greyback, has made it his life’s mission to infect as many people as possible. Most are children.”

Harry nodded, then asked what he had been avoiding. “What do you think about werewolves?”

His dad snorted. “I’ve never met a werewolf I’ve liked.”

Harry’s heart sank, though he imagined if his only encounter with a werewolf was Fenrir Greyback, he’d probably develop some prejudice. “Is it because they’re werewolves?”

His dad looked up. “It is because they are irresponsible. I have no issue with lycanthropy itself, but with those who fail to take precautions. Or those, like Greyback, who weaponize their disease.”

Harry nodded, looking at the picture again. Ogden had caused more chaos with a few fireworks than the goblins had in Chipping Clodbury.

“How much does it cost to brew Wolfsbane?” he asked. “Why can’t people just go to St. Mungo’s for it?”

His dad smiled slightly. “The inventor, Damocles Belby, holds the patent. It’s a proprietary potion, and it takes several centuries for potions to enter public domain. Meaning if I wanted to brew it, legally, I would need to purchase a license. Some of the ingredients are quite expensive, and difficult to procure. The brewing process itself is time consuming and onerous, I doubt St. Mungo’s has a potioneer on staff capable of it.” He took a sip of coffee, then said, “It would cost nearly half my yearly salary just to get started.”

Harry was silent for a moment, a guilty thought forming. “How much does it cost to make my potion?”

His dad gave him an impassive look. “You needn’t worry about that, Harry.”

Errol crashed through the kitchen window, followed by a much more composed Hermes. Percy held out an arm for his owl, then took the roll of parchment from his beak. Hermes blinked slowly, then flew off to hunt garden gnomes. He ate nearly one a day, substantially decreasing the population.

“Who’s that from, Perce?” Fred asked, leaning over to look. “Your girlfriend?”

“Shut up,” he said, too tired to deal with his brothers that morning. He had been accepted for another internship with the Ministry of Magic, this time in the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee. He’d got a letter of recommendation from Professor Burbage, his O in Muggle Studies already proving its worth.

“You said you wouldn’t make fun of him,” Ginny complained from down the table. Percy tucked the parchment away, wishing he hadn’t been reminded of his own sister walking in on him and Penelope. So much for suggesting they stopped meeting in the dungeons.

“Percy and Penny, sitting in a tree,” George sang. “K-I-S-S-I—”

“Oh, knock it off you two,” their mother snapped. “I’m sure Penelope is a lovely girl, Percy. You should bring her round for dinner some time!”

“Yeah, Percy,” Fred said. “You haven’t introduced us to your secret *girlfriend*.”

“That’s the last time I tell *you* anything,” Ginny grumbled. Percy was glad she was acting more like herself. She wasn’t crying all night anymore, or throwing things.

“She’s a prefect, right?” George said. “I think she’s taken points from us before.”

“Everyone’s taken points from us before,” Fred said.

“She’s in Ravenclaw,” Ginny said, smiling at Percy. He gave her a faint smile back, hoping to reassure her he wasn’t upset. He was, though. It was a mean thought, he knew, but Ginny had been able to keep the diary secret for months. She hadn’t even lasted a week with his secret. And now Penelope had ammunition to make it public.

His mother hummed happily as she cut into her fried egg. Percy stared at his own plate. He wasn’t hungry.

“Thank you for the food, mother,” Percy said, standing up.

“You’ve barely touched it!” she protested.

Percy looked down at his full plate. He couldn’t let it go to waste, she was right. He picked it up. “I will eat it in my room. There’s a report I must finish before I go in today.”

“You’re sure a bore, Percival,” Fred said, rolling his eyes.

“If you’re going upstairs, wake Ron, would you, dear?” their mother asked.

Ron’s bedroom was on the fifth floor, not exactly on Percy’s route to his own room on the second. “I shall.”

As he walked upstairs, his head nearly brushing the ceiling, Percy considered taking a firework from the twins’ room and tossing it through Ron’s window. The thought of eating all that food made him nauseous. He had been rationing his litorin, without telling his parents. He missed the regular doses he got at Hogwarts, paid for by the school. It had taken a weight

off of his parents' shoulders. When he graduated, he would have to start paying for it himself. So he needed to get that report done.

He left his plate in his room, went up to bang on Ron's door until he shouted that he was awake, then returned to the temporary quiet of his room. His mother refused to put silencing charms on any rooms, just in case something happened. Like the twins blowing up the house.

Percy cast his own, paying no heed to underage magic restrictions. No one would send a notice to their house, there was too much magic happening on a daily basis to discern who had cast it. If there was one, Percy knew his father would intercept it, as he had with Fleamont Potter's the previous year.

He glanced out of his window, spotting the hogs wallowing in their pen. His parents had got them years ago in hopes of luring a nogtail to the property. They hadn't been so lucky. He looked at his congealing breakfast. He typically spent his lunch in the Muggle world, both to get used to it and because the food was better for him to eat. Percy didn't think his mother could cook without magic, and it would have only added to her workload to make separate meals for him. He'd have to learn how to make his own food. He should have started years ago.

Percy turned away from the food and sat on his bed, pulling out the scroll. Unraveling it, he recognized Harry's neat handwriting immediately.

To Whomsoever It May Concern,

My deepest apologies for suborning Hermes. I have several undertakings which have prevented me from venturing into Diagon Alley and hiring a post owl. I hope I haven't spoiled his meal with bacon.

I agree with the thesis of your previous missive. If we look at the trajectory of werewolf legislation, it's clear the move has been to contain, not cure. The main argument for the Registry reform in 1966 was to maintain the Statute of Secrecy. So long as the muggles don't know, who cares what happens to them? I think this quote really captures the zeitgeist: "Soulless, evil, deserving nothing but death."

Imagine looking a child with lycanthropy in the eyes and telling them they deserve to be dead. That they are immutably evil.

This brings me to my second point: by what metric are creatures considered 'dark'? Is being a threat to humans enough? I've had something of a radical idea, which I'm reluctant to share as it could be construed as being for the spread of lycanthropy, rather than supporting individuals who have already contracted it.

If we look at lycanthropy, vampirism, and other soi-disant magical blood diseases, these conditions, if considered separate magical entities, have a biological directive to propagate. As a species...

Percy moved to his desk, casting a charm to reheat his meal, rereading Harry's letter as he ate. He needed to administer his litorin, go over his list of proposed excuses for grindylows found in ornamental ponds, stop by Gringotts to exchange a few sickles for muggle coins...

He took some pre-cut parchment from his drawer, a bottle of ink, and a quill.

Respected Sir, he began.

Harry woke up in the middle of the night when a letter fell on his face.

"What," he mumbled, waving his hand at a nearby candle. It sputtered to life, and Harry sat up, yawning and rubbing sleep from his eyes. He blinked down at the envelope, concerned. It was from Astrid. Had something happened? He fumbled with it, ultimately tearing the envelope open.

I did it, Haz! I got into the Harpies' summer camp! I think Hooch must've put in a word. I can't believe it!

Mhairi's fourth birthday's next week, want to come round? It was going to be turtle themed, but she met a selkie when out with mum, so now she wants to be a selkie princess...

Harry threw himself back on his bed. Astrid's family owl, a friendly barn owl named Moo-Moo—Mhairi's early attempt to say *moon*—hooted at him.

"Give me a minute," he said, smiling. "Couldn't have waited until morning, could she? Must've been too excited to sleep."

Moo-Moo hooted in agreement.

Harry had never been to a birthday party before, magical or otherwise. He had also never got a present for a four-year-old.

Remembering how many toys Mhairi had when he'd been to Astrid's house, Harry decided to strike that off the list. He stopped in front of Flourish and Blotts. There was a large window

display featuring *Hunting Werewolves*. Disgusted, Harry kept walking. He wouldn't be shopping there again.

He'd seen a few kids around Cokeworth playing with what looked like paper milk bottle caps, stacking them and throwing coins at them to get them to flip or something. He didn't really get it. He could go see what was available in the muggle world. Most magical childrens' things were out of his price range.

He kicked around the junk shop, having had success there before. There was nothing really child-appropriate, but Harry looked through the books anyway. He found something called *You and Your Owl*, a book on owl care. Owls were largely able to take care of themselves, but it had spells on healing injuries an owl might get, polishing and waxing beaks and claws, owl protection charms, and so on.

Snowy owls didn't exactly blend in.

Harry bought the book.

On the verge of giving up and finding a seal cuddly toy somewhere, or learning a selkie-themed sea shanty to play for Mhairi, Harry decided to try Scribbulus Writing Implements. He had yet to find a justification for using quills instead of pens, no matter how amusing using a quill was. It was one of those things everyone just accepted, or something they knew that he didn't.

Scribbulus wasn't exclusively a quill shop, though. It had ink, parchment, paper, stamps and wax, envelopes, brushes, pens, colored pencils and crayons, paints, ribbons, Spello-tape, stickers...

Harry paused in front of the stickers. He'd seen sticker albums for sale at Tesco the other day. Magical stickers might not be as impossible to remove as muggle ones, so it would be okay for a little kid.

He rifled through them, triumphantly pulling out a sheet featuring various merpeople. And it was only a few sickles.

As Harry made his way to the counter, he passed by a small display of fountain pens. They'd been discounted, probably since no one ever bought them. They all looked unique, not mass produced. Maybe a muggleborn had made them, hoping to start a trend. He picked one up, smiling as a new idea formed.

“Are you having fun?” Astrid shouted over the sound of a dozen children shrieking. They were in the garden of her parents' house, two lone teenagers surrounded by toddlers and adults.

“I have no idea what’s happening,” Harry replied, taking a sip of his butterbeer. Astrid’s mum had invited the selkie she had met. The selkie had brought two of her own children, who were splashing around Mhairi’s turtle-shaped wading pool, not yet able to fully shed their sealskins. The chaos orbited the selkie kids while their mother looking on, a beautiful mottled skin worn like a cape around her shoulders.

“It’s dangerous for them,” Harry said, “letting people know they’re selkies.”

“Yeah, people might steal their skins,” Astrid said. “Mum says the Ministry’s meant to help. It used to be a big problem with muggles doing it, but they don’t believe in selkies anymore. Or anything, really.”

Harry laughed. “They believe all sorts of things. I don’t even know where to start.”

“Dress up! Dress up!” Mhairi started chanting, soon joined by the other kids and the barking of baby seals. Mhairi crashed into Astrid’s legs then took her hand, pulling Astrid further onto the lawn. Astrid grabbed Harry and dragged him along too.

Half an hour later most of the children wore capes and crowns. Fairy wings had been affixed to the selkie kids, who had messily applied varnish on their claws. Harry was also subjected to this treatment, to Astrid’s delight.

“It suits you,” she said of his newly black nails.

“At least it comes off,” he said, not sure if he liked it or not. Robert Smith managed to pull it off, though Harry doubted he’d be trying lipstick any time soon. He took solace in Astrid having it done to her as well, by the birthday girl herself.

“I bet Diggory would like it,” Astrid said, frowning at the rainbow her nails had been turned into. Mhairi hadn’t been able to decide on a color.

“Who knows,” Harry said awkwardly. Astrid had touched on something in his dynamic with Cedric that made him uncomfortable. “He’s still in Ibiza. When’s your camp starting?”

Severus shuffled his papers for something to do. After several weeks of searching, he had finally found it, the spell Dumbledore had used. *Bend of blot*, the Bond of Blood. The text was nearly impossible to read, and it itself seemed to be a translation. Severus had tried to find how Lily had hidden her pregnancy, though perhaps with robes it was easier to conceal. He trusted nothing she had done had negatively impacted Harry’s health, but he wanted to make sure.

Most of the staff were gone for the summer. Hagrid and Filch both lived on the grounds, but more often than not kept their own company. He, along with the other heads of house and the headmaster, were going over various topics for the coming year.

“We are all agreed on the choices for fifth-year prefects?” Dumbledore said.

Severus leaned back. He had picked the least annoying students, as he did every year.

“Now, for Head Boy and Head Girl. Taking a look at the applications, I think we can disregard a few for poor grades...”

Severus obligingly flipped through his copies of the applications. They often sounded the same. They might as well pin the applications to a wall and throw darts to choose. Their pick for Head Girl was much like that, ekeing out a win based on her grades. There was almost no point in Slytherins applying. There had rarely been a Slytherin Head Boy or Girl since he was a student. The Dark Lord having been Head Boy—Severus had seen Tom Riddle in the Trophy Room, above the names of so many he had killed—might have had something to do with the headmaster setting aside Gemma Farley’s application. Or maybe the general unpopularity of Slytherin among the other houses. He hoped the same bias wouldn’t apply to his son, particularly if his airheaded boyfriend took a shot at the position.

McGonagall was inordinately pleased at their ultimate selection, but her face fell when it came time to discuss new quidditch captains. Severus gave her a nasty smile, then pulled out the lengthy report his son had compiled. The quidditch cup would be decorating *his* office next year.

Chapter End Notes

200k and I've forgotten to mention Mhairi is pronounced Vah-ree, for those who don't know

Give Quiche a Chance

Chapter Summary

July 1993

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Greetings and Salutations,

Whilst I initially intended to continue our discussion of the ongoing quasi-legitimate incarceration of Hodrod the Horny-Handed (crude moniker aside, I agree the ultra vires detainment of political dissidents is 'ironically muggle,' though I would extrapolate that to a more general statement about humanity), two pieces of news have reached my family this morning which I believe you will find of interest

First, my father has won the annual Daily Prophet Grand Prize Galleon Draw. My mother is currently making arrangements for our family to travel to Egypt for the remainder of holiday. I will, of course, be taking leave from my position with the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee, unless I am able to work from abroad. This will impact the rate of our correspondence, for which I apologize in advance. I too was surprised to see the Prophet further explore the reasons behind the Clodbury Chipping 'riot'—an inapt term—as they typically paint goblins as one-dimensional.

Second, I have been made Head Boy. Mother is pleased to have another Head Boy in the family.

Father has just left for the Daily Prophet offices to claim his winnings, and Mother has requested that Hermes be sent to Charles and William to forewarn them of our holiday plans. Hermes also has a note for the Ministry, and you would have my deepest gratitude if you could please send him along posthaste.

Warm regards,

Head Boy Percival Septimus Weasley

Rising Seventh-year Gryffindor Prefect

Harry covered his mouth, trying to get rid of the idiotic grin on his face, breakfast forgotten. Hermes started pecking at his toast, a note for the Ministry—likely a request for remote work—tied to his leg.

His dad ignored him, glaring at an old book he'd been reading all week.

Harry stood up. He needed to write Percy back immediately, before Hermes got sent to Romania. Benjy would do in a pinch, but his enchantments were starting to wear off and Harry didn't want to risk it.

He hurried into the living room to find parchment and quill, then back into the kitchen, pushing his breakfast aside so he could write.

Harry stared at the parchment, almost sticking the end of the quill in his mouth until he remembered it was a feather.

Most Honorable Head Boy Percival Septimus Weasley,

Congratulations on your first leave of absence...

Severus glanced up to see his son scribbling frantically, a feverish look on his face. A large grey screech owl was eating Harry's breakfast. Deciding he wanted nothing to do with it, he turned back to the *Bend of blot*.

Ƣa se blot ic i ġefylle se bearn befolgen heora hēafodm æġ

Gyf hie efnsecġe beorgan þus ġearone ġealdor

It was utter gibberish.

He had hoped he would be able to give Potter the same protection under Harry as the boy had under their aunt. But, if he was reading the text correctly, that wasn't possible. It was odd that

the charm worked at all, considering it was cast *after* Lily's sacrifice. The equations bore out, though, so it had been successful.

The charm was sealed by Petunia accepting Monty Potter into her home. And that was it. It was tied to *her* home. Someone else would have to die for Potter if Severus wanted to do the charm with Harry. However, Harry had property under Fidelius, and was his own secret-keeper. That side-stepped the vulnerability of trusting someone else to be secret-keeper. Being protected by the blood bond didn't matter if Potter couldn't be found at all.

Irritated, he closed the book just in time to see his son escorting the owl to the window. Severus would have to think of another birthday gift.

"You are fifteen," his dad said.

"I am," Harry agreed. He'd just walked in for breakfast after being accosted by owls at his house. Adrian was learning. There was something baking in the oven that smelled fantastic.

His dad placed several books on the kitchen table. *Protection Charm Your Mind: A Practical Guide to Counter Legilimency*, and *Living With Legilimens: Choose Your Minds Wisely*.

"There are certain inheritable traits passed down through select wizarding families," his dad said. "I should have been able to infer your heritage based on several you have. Your passive occlumency is something I too possess, as did my mother, and her father, and so on. But, as with any talent, it will languish if not properly nurtured."

Another book was added to the pile. It was smaller, older, the black binding tattered and worn.

"Occlumency is not considered a dark art because it is predominantly used as defense to a dark art. To wit, Legilimency."

"Predominantly?" Harry asked.

"There are tertiary applications," his dad said. "Emotional regulation, resistance to other forms of psychic attack."

"Should I be worried about Trelawney?" Harry asked, smiling.

"Only if you get between her and her sherry," his dad said drily. "As I've mentioned, Legilimency is a dark art, as most mental magics are classed. The Imperius Curse, memory charms, confusion curses, forcible memory extraction, entrancing enchantments, various potions. Obviously these are not identical things."

"Is it obvious?" Harry asked. "Not all of those things are illegal. Most of them aren't."

“Is that your standard for magic being dark?” his dad asked, raising an eyebrow. “Legality? Hogwarts teaches various hexes, jinxes, and curses, all of which fall under the umbrella of *dark arts*. The Ministry routinely obviates muggles. Love potions can be purchased at joke shops. Being socially acceptable does not make these things any less *dark*, depending on one’s definition.”

A timer went off, and his dad stood to retrieve whatever was in the oven. “Legality isn’t the only consideration when using dark magic. There is morality, which I think you’ve discovered is more malleable in our community. Some spells may have a deleterious effect on the caster. Legilimency, if properly countered, can be reflected.”

Harry picked up one of the occlumency books. “So someone who doesn’t know legilimency can still enter someone’s mind?”

“It is possible, yes,” his dad said, setting a large tart on the table.

“Is that quiche?” Harry asked, smiling.

His dad sat down, his face curiously blank. “I have observed that, when the house-elves serve quiche, you take a second helping.” He cleared his throat. “I will be teaching you Legilimency. Unlike Occlumency, it *is* illegal, so I trust you will be circumspect.”

“How does that even work?” Harry asked as his dad cast a spell to cool the quiche. “You can’t really learn occlumency without someone using legilimency on you.”

His dad chuckled, then cut into the quiche. “The last thing anyone would accuse the Ministry of is rationality.”

“We should do something special,” Phoebe said, jabbing her spoon at Harry. It dripped cantaloupe ice cream onto the table. Her frog hopped over and his tongue shot out, lapping it up.

“Rob Gringotts,” Adrian suggested.

“Not *that* special,” Phoebe said, tutting. “What do you think, Harry? It’s your birthday, after all.”

Harry wasn’t sure. After quiche, and a few hours of being legilimized, Harry had gone to Diagon Alley to meet with some of his friends. Astrid was busy training at her quidditch camp. Jasmine was in Guadeloupe with her mother, though she had sent him a pair of fingerless gloves she had made. He had no idea what creature the leather came from. Terence was on holiday with his parents, and Cassius was in New York with his grandmother, doing something diplomatic.

Harry had considered inviting Cedric too, but decided it was best not to force his friends to interact. He wasn't even sure he'd told Cedric his birthdate.

"I was thinking we could go to that game shop," Harry said.

"Antumbra Arcade?" Phoebe said. "Is it even open this early?"

"We could break in," Adrian said, scraping melted ice cream from the bottom of his cup. "I heard they've hired some dwarfs for a dunk tank."

"I'm too young to have a criminal record," Phoebe said. "Or not young enough. Teenage delinquency is pedestrian."

"We could *perambulate* Knockturn," Adrian said, rolling his eyes.

"You want to slum it?" Harry asked, laughing. "Go on, then."

Harry finished his *halo-halo*, something he had never heard of nor seen before. It had been filled with all sorts of chewy and sticky sweet things, and topped with a purple ice cream Fortescue had told him was flavored with yam.

"Have you ever even *been* in Knockturn Alley?" Phoebe asked Adrian as he led the way.

"With my cousin," Adrian said, putting an exaggerated scowl on his face.

"What are you doing with your face?" Phoebe asked. "It's going to get stuck like that."

"It's to scare them off," he said.

"Who's them?" Harry asked, wondering how long it would take for Adrian to get jumped.

"You know," Adrian said, waving his hands around. "*Them*."

"Oh, right, of course," Phoebe said, rolling her eyes. "*Them*. Makes total sense, thanks *so* much for clarifying."

Harry crossed his arms, looking around as they walked. He knew being too curious would make him stand out, but he didn't overly mind since he was with a group. Knockturn hadn't changed much since the last time he had been, except there seemed to be more people. It could have been due to it being summer, but he saw a number of adults with silvery scars and haunted eyes. Werewolves, newly unemployed.

"Maybe this was a bad idea," Phoebe said quietly. "Harry, you look upset."

He shrugged. "Just thinking about the government."

"That'll do it," Adrian said, laughing.

They continued walking through Knockturn, pausing to look at dusty window displays, a fountain clogged with things Harry had no wish to identify, evaded the old witch selling

fingernails—it had taken Harry some time to work out they were probably for polyjuicing. Phoebe veered off to play a game of hopscotch with some kids and her frog, and Harry got prodded into a game of street gobstones, which was just gobstones except played outside.

“Think they’ll serve us?” Adrian asked.

They had stopped in front of a staircase wedged between a pawn shop and a tattoo parlor, Markus Scarr’s Indelible Tattoos. The door promised *Ornate Designs to Impress or Menace*. Above the staircase was a sign depicting a white wyvern breathing curling flames. The pub was unsurprisingly called The White Wyvern.

Phoebe looked up the dark, uneven stairs, frowning. “It looks like a death trap.”

“Steady on, Pheebs,” Adrian said. “How about a tattoo, Haz?”

“I’d need time to think about something like that,” he said, looking at the door. “Years.”

“We could still see what they do,” Adrian said, opening the door to the tattoo parlor. A bell jangled.

“It says *indelible*, Adrian,” Phoebe said flatly. Her frog croaked.

“I *am* curious about magical tattoos,” Harry said, following Adrian into the shop. Unlike most businesses in Knockturn Alley, the tattoo parlor was brightly lit, and smelled like an infirmary. Moving pictures covered the walls, displaying a wide variety of art styles. There was a desk, and an empty chair behind it, and a few chairs set out for clients. There was a door leading to the back, which was shut. Phoebe plopped onto a chair, picking up a book left on a small table. Harry looked over her shoulder as she flipped through. It was a photo album of clients, close ups of their tattoos.

There was a lighted display case that had various pieces of jewelry. Jeweled studs, rings, little bar-shaped things, coils, small chains, discs.

“Appointments only!” a deep voice called from the back, startling all three of them. Adrian had been on the verge of banging the call bell on the desk. Phoebe quickly shut the album as heavy footsteps approached.

“We were just looking around,” Harry said. “We didn’t mean to intrude.”

“I did,” Adrian said happily.

The person, presumably Markus Scarr, opened the door and looked them over. Harry had never seen anyone with so many tattoos before, or piercings. Or so many muscles. Except maybe a centaur.

“No Hogwarts students,” the man said, shaking his head. “Go play somewhere else, brats.”

Phoebe jumped up. “Apologies sir. We really *were* just looking, sir. It’s Harry’s birthday!”

Harry gaped at her, aghast.

“Is it really indelible?” Adrian asked.

Scarr leaned on the desk, showing off a very large tattoo of a nundu rampaging across his arm. “Yes.”

“Where’d you get all those piercings?”

“Adrian,” Harry hissed.

“I did them myself,” Scarr said, raising a metal-studded eyebrow.

“Wicked!” Adrian turned around and grinned at Harry. “That’s it!”

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose. “If I wanted to get my ears pierced I could go to the mall.”

“What’s a mall?” Adrian asked. “And who said anything about ears?”

Scarr sighed. “Since you lot are already in here, and since it’s apparently someone’s birthday,” he said, smiling at Harry, “I’ll tell you that piercings are two galleons each, plus the price of jewelry. Or you could bring your own.”

Adrian pointed at Harry. “Ha! I’ll pay for it!”

“I feel like you suggested a heist just so I’d agree to something less insane,” Harry said. He didn’t mind getting his ears pierced, he could always take them out later. “You’re paying for dinner, too.”

Severus looked up from his reading as the floo flared. Harry stepped out, holding a giant plush swooping evil.

“Adrian won it for me,” Harry explained. “He dunked the most dwarfs.”

The swooping evil flapped its dread wings, hissing.

“I see,” Severus said. He narrowed his eyes. There was something different about his son.

Harry raised a hand to an ear self-consciously. “That was Adrian’s idea too.”

His son had got his ears pierced. His son was turning into a goth.

“It’s...it’s okay, right?” Harry asked.

Severus turned back to his book. “It suits you. Tell me, what else did Mr. Pucey coerce you into today?”

“Well, his first idea was to break into Gringotts,” Harry began, setting the honestly massive plush toy on the floor to sit on. It gave a hoarse shriek. Delightful.

After Harry had left for the evening, Severus raised a hand to his own ear, feeling the closed over hole Lily had stabbed into it so many years ago.

A letter from Cedric came with the *Daily Prophet* one morning, a few days after Harry’s birthday.

Hi, Harry!

How’s your holiday been? Spain was brilliant, I can’t wait to tell you all about it. I had paella, which had a lot of shells in it. You can’t eat those, right?

A few mates of mine from quidditch are going to meet up for a game next week. Do you want to come? You don’t have to play, but we could fly around for a bit.

See you soon!

Cedric

PS Mum wants to know if you’d like to come round for dinner?

Harry set the note aside. It would be nice to see Cedric, but *just* Cedric. Harry liked him better when his friends weren’t around. He glanced at the black varnish still on his nails, thinking.

Just the day before, there had been a picture of the Weasleys in the *Daily Prophet*. The entire family, standing in front of the Great Pyramid of Giza. Percy had hilariously been wearing a fez, his Head Boy badge pinned to it, smiling into the camera. Harry knew it was stupid, stupid and pointless and embarrassing, and it made him feel guilty, but he’d cut the picture out and hid it in his first year spellbook.

The table suddenly broke in half. The teapot, cups, and plates shattered, eggs, tea, tomato sauce splattering the floor.

Harry pushed his chair back, looking at his dad in shock. He had never seen anyone so enraged in his entire life. The entire house shuddered around them, as if they were in an earthquake.

“Dad?”

His dad held the *Daily Prophet* in a white-knuckled grip, held so tightly the paper was beginning to tear.

“Dad? What’s wrong?”

His dad finally looked up at him, looked at the mess the kitchen had become.

“Bloody hell,” he said, surprising a harsh laugh out of Harry. His dad took his wand out and waved it around, and to Harry’s amazement the destruction began reversing itself.

“My apologies,” his dad said in a voice so abruptly empty of emotion it was almost scarier than his anger. “Accidental magic can still occur in adulthood in times of great emotional distress. It tends to take the same form.”

“Right,” Harry said slowly, retrieving his own *Daily Prophet* from the restored table. He unrolled it, and his heart stopped.

The table burst into flames.

“What the fuck,” Harry said, not noticing as his dad quickly put the flames out. His hands were shaking. Everything was shaking. “What the fuck.”

Sirius Black had escaped from Azkaban.

“That’s impossible!” Harry said, staring at the picture of the gaunt, sunken eyed man. Flat, empty, devoid of life. “What the fuck!”

“I’ll kill him,” his dad said, as if stating some incontrovertible truth. “If he comes near you, or your brother, I will kill him.”

“I want to know why,” Harry said, not minding if Sirius Black was dead. As far as Harry was concerned, Black had been a dead man walking since he sold out his mum. “Why did he betray them? It doesn’t make sense! They were friends for years!”

His dad looked sharply at him. “How do you know that?”

“Gran told me,” Harry said heatedly. “She told me about the people mum knew at Hogwarts, though obviously she left out a few. She has letters from him! He wrote to her!” He paused, breathing heavily. “You knew him, right? You were all in the same year.”

His dad’s face darkened. “I knew him.”

“Well?” Harry asked. “What was he like? I never understood why he did it. Gran didn’t either. It didn’t make sense to her.”

Severus set his paper face down. He had never wanted to see Sirius Black again, and if he was on the run, soon his face would be plastered everywhere. He needed to contact Dumbledore, and was a little surprised the headmaster hadn't already summoned him to the castle.

"Sirius Black," he began, mouth twisting distastefully. "I won't go into the sordid details. He was in Gryffindor, possibly the first Black in history to be sorted thusly. His younger brother went to Slytherin, and they never spoke. Regulus Black," he clarified.

"He's the one who disappeared?" Harry asked.

"Yes," he said. "He was a Death Eater, albeit briefly. One day he simply stopped showing up to meetings."

"Was Sirius Black at the meetings too?" Harry asked. "How did he end up joining the Dark Lord?"

Severus frowned. "It was a...surprise to learn he was allied with the Dark Lord."

Harry looked skeptical. "All the articles I've read said he was the Dark Lord's right-hand man."

He shook his head. "That is an overstatement. I think Bellatrix would have been overjoyed if her cousin had followed his family into the Dark Lord's service. I imagine he was a spy. No one questioned Black's loyalty to James Potter, and by extension Dumbledore. He would have been the ideal agent for the Dark Lord."

Harry crossed his arms, an odd look on his face. "Okay, this is what gran told me. Black was best friends with Monty's dad from the beginning. He was also friends with mum. For nearly a decade. He ran away from his family, right? Some of the letters he sent mum were from the Potters' house."

Severus nodded.

"So was he planning on betraying them the whole time?" Harry asked. "Was it all fake? And what *I really* don't get is why he went crazy and killed all those muggles, and Peter Pettigrew."

Severus didn't know. "Guilt, perhaps," he said. "Or maybe he had been insane the entire time, and was particularly adept at hiding it."

He hated Sirius Black. He hated Black almost as much as he hated himself. If he hadn't told the Dark Lord the prophecy, if Black hadn't told him where Lily was.

He still hadn't told Harry about the prophecy. About his own role in the death of Lily Evans.

"No one expected it," he said. "Everyone believed he was too loyal to Potter."

Harry's face hardened. "How did people even know who the secret-keeper was? Or that they were under Fidelius at all?"

Severus stared at his son. "I don't know."

Harry looked up at him, eyes burning. "Does he know where my brother lives?"

Chapter End Notes

It really is good as gibberish, I don't know Old English. It roughly means, "Once the sacrifice is made, the child is then taken to the closest living relative. If the relative agrees to shelter them, the charm is sealed."

Soft Spots

Chapter Summary

July 1993

Another letter came from Cedric. Amos Diggory didn't want his only son leaving the house with Black on the run. It seemed the entire Ministry had been mobilized.

The owl Cedric had sent was waiting for a reply, sitting in the window of Harry's bedroom. Harry pushed his new swooping evil plush off of himself, found something to scribble a reply on, then shooed the owl off. He had more important things to deal with than Cedric Diggory.

Harry left his room, walking through his house to the bathroom. He sat on the edge of the tub as it filled. His dad had magicked things up so Harry didn't have to haul buckets filled at the pump outside, and other spells to make living in a muggle house without any utilities easier. He peeled off his sweat-soaked shirt, grimacing as he looked at the bandage wrapped around his chest. He knew he couldn't leave it on all the time, and that it had to be cleaned. He had meant to do it the night before, but he had been too worried about Sirius Black.

How had he escaped Azkaban? It was in the middle of the North Sea, guarded by hundreds of dementors. Why had he escaped now? Was it Voldemort again? Had he possessed Black? Why possess someone in Azkaban?

Harry unwound the bandage, wrinkling his nose, then quickly climbed into the tub to hide in the water. He wanted to linger, stick his head under the water and maintain the illusion that his brother was safe. He knew where Monty lived now, his brother had told Harry himself. He could take the Knight Bus and be there within the hour, abscond with Monty, and hide him under Fidelius until Black was recaptured. He'd have to shut up some of the rooms, hide the pictures and photo albums, get rid of all the evidence that Lily Evans and Petunia Evans had ever existed. He scrubbed his hair, annoyed. Black knew where their mum was from. Would he think to look for Monty Potter in Cokeworth?

Once Harry was finished in the bath, he got dressed as quickly as he could and made for his dad's house. He plucked at the long sleeves of his jumper as he walked. It was soft and warm and hid his chest. The stupid bandage hadn't dried fast enough. He stopped in the middle of the street, realizing he could have brought it with him and dried it at his dad's house. Frustrated, he kept walking. Harry loathed the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery of 1875. He'd been born a century too late. *Reasonable*. Would it be *reasonable* for Monty to defend himself if Black broke into the Dursleys' and snatched him from his bed? Or would Mafalda bloody Hopkirk send him a notice? Stupid Ministry cunts, couldn't even keep a man in Azkaban.

He didn't need a key to get into his dad's house, the door opened under his hand. It was quiet inside, which wasn't unusual. His dad preferred silence. What was unusual was his dad wasn't in the kitchen. There was only one place set. Harry approached it slowly, his anxiety growing when he saw the note left under a goblet brimming with a blood red potion. Several vials of a placid green potion were laid out next to it.

The headmaster requires my presence. Use the floo to get to St. Mungo's.

Harry sat heavily in his chair. He'd never gone to an appointment with Andromeda without his dad.

He drank the potion as fast as he could, making a silent wish that he'd grow taller, then turned to his breakfast. He had to eat. He wanted to go to Surrey and preemptively kidnap his brother. He had an appointment. He'd be no use to Monty if he dropped dead.

Harry hid his face in his arms as Andromeda did her work. It never got any better. He would never get used to the feeling. It was delicate work, he knew, masterful transfiguration, requiring detailed knowledge of anatomy. He was really fortunate to have Andromeda to help him, and Madam Pomfrey, and his dad.

The ache felt more persistent that day, and Andromeda had to help him sit up again.

"You're related to Sirius Black," Harry said, staring at the ground and tugging on a sleeve. He hated how weak he sounded.

"He is my cousin," Andromeda said neutrally.

Harry looked up at her. "Were you close at all?"

Andromeda didn't react. "I was already out of Hogwarts when he began. When I married Ted, I was cast out of the family."

She hadn't answered the question.

Harry wrapped his arms around himself. Andromeda always gave him as much time as he needed to get it together.

"Are you worried about him?" she asked. "I can't imagine he's in the best shape, after twelve years in Azkaban."

He didn't know what to say that wouldn't give too much away. "It sounds horrible."

“It does,” Andromeda said, turning away from him. “I’m sure the Ministry will capture him soon enough.”

Severus walked through the castle, fuming. He was missing Harry’s appointment. He blamed Sirius Black. Would it bother Harry? How could he make up for it?

He scowled. He had rarely exerted so much effort for one person as he did for his son, and most of it seemed to be emotional in nature. He had only ever cared about Lily’s feelings before, and the headmaster had thrown that in his face.

“You disgust me. You do not care, then, about the deaths of her husband and child? They can die, as long as you have what you want?”

“What will you give me in return, Severus?”

He hadn’t cared about her feelings when he called her a *mudblood*. Or when he mocked Petunia for being a muggle. Or when Mulciber couldn’t take *no* for an answer and had gone after Mary MacDonald. Or when he prioritized her life over that of her son.

Was it any wonder she hadn’t told him about Harry?

His mood grew darker as he neared the headmaster’s office, riding the asinine spiral stairs to his waiting door.

“Is it Black?” he said, storming into the office. “Has he gone after the boy?”

“Good morning, Severus,” Dumbledore said, smiling at him. “Monty is perfectly safe. I’ve just spoken with Arabella, and she assures me everything is normal at Privet Drive.”

“Then why am I here?”

“We will be requiring a supply of Wolfsbane this coming year,” the headmaster said. “I’ve already spoken with Damocles, and he has agreed to provide the recipe so long as it is not being brewed for profit.”

Dumbledore placed a thick scroll on his desk.

“It takes a fortnight to brew,” Severus said. “The next full moon is in a week.”

“Then you will have plenty of time to acquire the necessary ingredients for the full moon after,” Dumbledore said.

“Is this for a student?” he asked. “A first-year? Has someone been bitten?”

“I should hope not,” Dumbledore said, chuckling. “No, it is for our new Defense professor.”

Severus stared at him. “Don’t tell me.”

“Remus Lupin.”

“You expect me to work with *him*?”

Dumbledore looked over his glasses. “Remus has never done anything to you, Severus, despite the company he kept.”

Severus looked at the scroll on the desk.

It was a chance to study the Wolfsbane Potion. Lupin would be a competent instructor. Harry cared about the welfare of lycanthropes. Severus clung to what positive things he could. But Lupin had also been friends with Black. A perennial bystander. Where had he even been for the past decade?

“Fine,” he said. “Now, about Black—”

“I know you are very eager to revenge yourself upon him, Severus,” Dumbledore said kindly. Severus wasn’t fooled. “Perhaps we should give the Ministry a chance to do their jobs? We have Hogwarts to concern ourselves with.”

Severus breathed slowly, in and out. Harry had questions for which he had no answers. Perhaps Harry would overlook his absence at his appointment if he got those answers. But even in the asking he would reveal something to Dumbledore. He would have to be subtle. He *was* supposed to be a spy.

“Very well,” he said, taking the scroll containing the Wolfsbane formula. He opened it, scanning the ingredients. “Some of these aren’t used in any potions in the curriculum.”

“I’m sure you can manage,” Dumbledore said lightly. “As you so often remind us, you *are* the Potions master.”

Severus arrived home to find his son lying on the living room floor, arms covering his head.

“I’m sorry for missing your appointment,” he said. He had debated whether to say anything at all, but he did regret being called away for something that could have been communicated via owl.

“It’s fine,” Harry said in a flat voice. “Was it about Monty? Is he okay?”

“The headmaster assures me he is safe,” he said. “The elderly squib woman across the street confirmed it.”

“Mrs. Figg,” Harry said. “Unless Black gets hold of a wand, it’ll be a few days until he can make it to Surrey. If Monty is his actual target.”

Severus moved into the kitchen. He needed coffee. He imagined Harry could use some as well. He heard his son get up and shuffle after him.

“Maybe he was sick of being in Azkaban and wanted a holiday,” Harry said, in a tone saying he didn’t believe his own words. Harry sat down in a chair and laid his head on the table. “What did the headmaster want then?”

“I will be brewing Wolfsbane,” he said, setting the kettle to boil. “Remus Lupin will be the Defense professor this year.”

Harry sat up, and Severus smiled to himself.

“He’s a werewolf?” Harry asked. “He’s not on the Registry.”

Severus glanced at his son. “You’ve read that? And no, he is unregistered. His condition was kept secret during our school years, and beyond.”

“But you knew?” Harry asked. “Otherwise you would be acting more surprised.”

“Yes,” he said, “though you shouldn’t trust the emotions I display are what I truly feel.”

Harry fell silent, and Severus returned to making coffee.

“Is it a coincidence?” Harry asked after a few minutes. “That Lupin’s at Hogwarts with Black on the run?”

Severus tipped grounds into the cafetière Harry had got him for Christmas. It was less work than a percolator, and the end result was much less bitter.

“Lupin’s appointment serves multiple ends,” he said, pouring water over the grounds. “Dumbledore has always had a soft spot for lost causes. A soft spot in his skull,” he added under his breath, stirring the grounds. “Being unregistered means Lupin has likely not revealed his condition to any of his employers. Missing work every full moon is an obvious tell, and would make holding a job for any significant period of time difficult. The Defense position is becoming increasingly troublesome to fill, so the headmaster could be feeling desperate. Considering the recent anti-werewolf law, circumstances have aligned. I’m not sure what relevance Lupin has to Black. They were friends, and Lupin would know Black better than anyone else alive, but that was over a decade ago.”

“Everyone else who knew him is dead,” Harry said.

Severus joined his son at the table as the grounds steeped.

“I have to tell Monty,” Harry said.

“About Lupin? His condition is to be kept secret.”

Harry gave him an unimpressed look. “No, not him. If it gets out he’s an unregistered werewolf, they’ll send the werewolf hunters after him. I’m talking about Sirius Black. About who Sirius Black is to him.”

“If your brother truly is his goal,” Severus said.

Harry wrapped his arms around himself. “If Black serves the Dark Lord, what else would it be?”

As the days passed, Black remained at large. The *Daily Prophet* made oblique references to *Azkaban guards*. It was another thing everyone who grew up in the magical world knew: dementors guarded Azkaban. Anyone else might think there were human guards combing the countryside, and not monstrous cloaked beings that fed off of happiness and souls.

The Ministry had ground to a halt as they devoted all resources to finding Sirius Black.

Harry stood in the middle of the living room. He pointed his wand at his dad, who stared back impassively. “*Legilimens*.”

It was like stepping into a void, drifting listlessly in deep space. There was nothing.

Harry pulled back, unnerved.

“That is what an amateur Occlumens is like,” his dad said. “A total absence of thought reveals the act of occluding. Unless the person truly is empty-headed. Someone more practiced in the art can display what thoughts, what emotions, they choose too. This misleads the Legilimens, who believes they have been successful.”

“So if someone legilimized me, they would know I was occluding?”

“As you are now, yes,” his dad said. “And if you are occluding, you are hiding something.”

“Maybe I just don’t want someone to read my thoughts,” he said, smirking at his dad’s expression. His dad hated Legilimency being conflated with mind reading. “Wanting privacy isn’t suspicious.”

“And yet you *are* hiding things,” his dad said. “Which is precisely why—”

“*Legilimens!*”

His dad gave him an unimpressed look. “The element of surprise isn’t going to work on me.”

“Do people know when they are being legilimized?” Harry asked.

“Not if done by a skilled Legilimens,” his dad said. “That is to say, one who is subtle in their approach, such as the headmaster. The Dark Lord had no need for subtlety. One could feel him ransacking their mind.”

It sounded like his dad had experience with it. Harry thought back to what his dad had said about Black. No one had questioned his loyalty. An ideal agent.

“You were a spy, weren’t you?” Harry asked.

His dad raised an eyebrow.

“I guess the question is for who,” Harry said, eyeing him.

“Why don’t you attempt to find out?”

“*Legilimens!*”

“You need to focus,” his dad said, shaking his impenetrable head. “Manipulate people into thinking of the information you want.”

Harry frowned. “Legilimency is why I don’t trust people.”

“Are you concerned it will be used against you?” his dad asked.

“No,” Harry said. “I don’t want to tell someone something and have it magicked out of them. Like Monty.”

“Legilimency is a rare enough ability to not be of much concern,” his dad said.

“Except two powerful Legilimens are interested in him,” Harry said.

“I doubt the Dark Lord can use Legilimency in his current state,” his dad said. “Or any magic. But,” he added, noticing Harry’s growing frustration, “it would be prudent to teach your brother some basic mind clearing exercises. It is, however, not advisable to teach children active occlumency.”

“Fifteen is old enough?” Harry asked.

“Barely,” his dad said. “In your case, it is a matter of improving upon a foundation. For your brother, it would be starting from the ground up.”

Harry nodded. Clearing the mind was ridiculously hard, once Harry had started paying attention to what he was doing.

“Now,” his dad said, “as there is little point in legitimizing an empty mind, for your next attempt I will not be occluding in that manner. Let us see if you can determine what is real and what is fabricated.”

Harry didn’t think his prospects of that were good this early on. He lifted his wand, met his dad’s eyes, and said, “*Legilimens!*”

For some godforsaken reason, the school owl arrived at midnight the day of his brother's birthday, pecking at Harry's bedroom window.

Harry shoved the window open and blearily accepted the letter, rubbing his eyes as the owl flew off. He froze, then lowered his hand, staring after the owl. He was going into fifth year. Fifth year meant prefects.

Harry carefully opened the envelope, pulling out two pieces of paper. Something fell onto the floor. Harry bent down to retrieve it.

It was a Slytherin prefect badge, silver and green, a *P* superimposed on the Slytherin snake. He thought maybe Cassius would be chosen. Cassius had more respect for rules, if only because he couldn't be arsed to break them.

He picked up the letter that came with the badge.

Dear Mr. Evans,

It is my pleasure to inform you that you have been chosen as a Slytherin prefect. Your commitment to academics, relationships with students of other houses, and your commendable actions taken in defense of the school, overwhelmingly recommend you to the position.

In addition to your new role as a prefect, you have been officially assigned as the Slytherin gobstones team captain. Despite Miss Lament's enthusiasm, club leadership is governed by heads of house. I believe you already have the badge.

Congratulations,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Harry laughed, smiling down at the badge in his hand.

Harry was woken up again by pecking at his window. Groaning, he rolled out of bed and opened the window. A barn owl darted in, dropped an envelope on his head, then sped away.

The envelope began sizzling. Harry snatched it off his head and tore it open.

HAZ! I'M QUIDDITCH CAPTAIN!

Astrid's overjoyed screaming filled his room. Harry laughed helplessly, covering his ears. He'd had no idea Howlers could be used for good news.

Monty yawned, deciding he could finish his draft essay on medieval witch hunts later. It was the last of his summer assignments, and his *A History of Magic* book didn't mention the impact the burnings had on muggles. According to Harry, a lot of muggles had also been accused of witchcraft, and had been executed, hanged or burnt at the stake. Unlike witches and wizards, the tens of thousands of muggles killed couldn't use flame-freezing and levitation charms.

Harry had given him the idea of drafting his essays first using muggle pens and paper, and then writing the final version with quill and parchment. The Dursleys complained if he kept them up with his quill scratching.

Something crashed onto his bed, and in the room next door Uncle Vernon gave a loud snort.

Monty stood to investigate and saw his bed had a pile of owls on it. There was Errol, the Weasleys' elderly owl. Hedwig, who was detangling herself from the package Errol carried. A tawny owl that had a Hogwarts letter with it, and a fierce-looking long-eared owl who had her head turned away from Errol.

Monty hurried over, deciding the unconscious Errol needed his help most. He relieved Errol of his burden and carried him over to Hedwig's cage, where he hooted weakly and began drinking water. He next untied the package from Hedwig, who nipped him then flew to join Errol. The tawny owl was gone as soon as Monty got the package and letter from him, as was the long-eared owl.

He checked his watch, and realized he'd just turned thirteen.

Starting with Errol's package, Monty learned that his friend Ron was in Egypt with his family, Mr. Weasley having won some kind of lottery. Ron had sent him a clipping of the article, and a Pocket Sneakoscope. It looked like a small glass top, and was meant to light up, spin, and whistle if someone untrustworthy was nearby.

Hedwig had brought him a letter from Hermione, who was on holiday in France. She had also sent him a broom servicing kit, which he was excited to try. He hadn't known brooms needed servicing, and two years seemed a long time to go without it.

The school owl had brought his booklist and a permission form for Hogsmeade he needed to get signed. The package was from Hagrid, who sent a book which tried to bite him. Monty had no idea how he was meant to read such a book, but thought Harry might have some idea. He'd seen the older boy with books from the Restricted Section before, where Monty imagined violent books were kept.

The last package was surprisingly from Harry. At least, that's what Monty assumed, since Harry never put his name on anything. He read the letter first.

You are thirteen. Good job.

Monty snorted and kept reading.

While I wish this was only a birthday letter, recent events have compelled me to share some unpleasant information with you. I would prefer to do so in person, but it is highly inadvisable for you to be traveling anywhere by yourself. It is possible I could meet with you at your home, or nearby.

A dangerous man by the name of Sirius Black has escaped from Azkaban, the magical prison. I've included a clipping from the Daily Prophet so you know what he looks like.

Monty found the picture of Sirius Black. He reminded Monty of people who'd been prisoners in war camps. Dirty, ragged clothes, matted hair, beaten down, all the life drained out of him.

You may recognize his name, though it has been omitted from most books published after the fall of Voldemort, for reasons I'm not entirely certain of. I do have my suspicions, which we can discuss at some point.

There is more.

I know learning magic is real must have come as a great shock. You may also be surprised to learn that mind reading is real. Don't actually call it that, though, it makes people who practice Legilimency upset. That's the magical art of mind infiltration, Legilimency. It is a dark art and illegal in Britain, and most other countries for that matter. The counter to it is Occlumency. I've included some beginner exercises that will help on your path to mastering Occlumency.

Sorry for all the dour news. I do hope you have a happy birthday.

Harry had put a little cartoon drawing of a thestral at the end, which had been charmed to flap its wings.

There were several more pages filled with Harry's handwriting, which Monty looked over. People could read minds? Or, infiltrate minds? And someone broke out of *Azkaban*? What did that have to do with Monty? Unless the man was one of Voldemort's supporters, a Death Eater.

One of Harry's parents was a Death Eater.

Monty's eyes widened. Was Harry's *dad* the man who had broken out?

He picked up the Sneakoscope. It would give him some warning, if it worked. It *had* worked when Fred and George put beetles in Bill's food, according to Ron.

Monty set the Sneakoscope on his desk, along with the notes from Harry, then turned to the package Harry had sent. Given the letter, Monty was a little concerned Harry had sent him some kind of weapon. But, to his surprise, it was a book titled *You and Your Owl*, along with some owl care products. The book was filled with spells that could change the color of Hedwig's feathers, sharpen her beak and claws, help her carry greater burdens, to fly faster.

Monty wondered if any of the spells would work on Luna, and smiled to himself.

Happy Birthday

Chapter Summary

July 31st, 1993

Chapter Notes

First AO3 goes down, then my internet goes down, then I can't find my glasses... The world is out to get me.

Monty ventured downstairs on the morning of his birthday. It was already shaping up to be better than his previous birthdays. He'd got presents.

He joined the Dursleys at the kitchen table. None of them greeted him, which he didn't mind. It was no different from how they had been acting all summer. Sitting between his cousin and uncle, Monty reached for a piece of toast, then paused. It was his birthday. He reached instead for the cornflakes, and while his aunt gave him a hard look, she didn't comment as he added milk.

Dudley's eyes were fixed to the new television his parents had put in the kitchen. He'd been living in the kitchen all summer, which made getting food difficult for Monty as his cousin would often shout at him to get out of the way of the telly. Monty glanced at the screen and saw the reporter was talking about an escaped convict.

"The public is warned that Black is armed and extremely dangerous. A special hot line has been set up, and any sighting of Black should be reported immediately."

The telly displayed a picture of Sirius Black.

Monty nearly choked on his cornflakes.

"No need to tell us he's no good," Uncle Vernon said, glaring over the top of his newspaper. "Look at the state of him, the filthy layabout! Look at his hair!"

Uncle Vernon looked pointedly at Monty's messy hair. Monty was tempted to tell him even magic couldn't fix it. Instead, he coughed a few times, dislodging some cornflakes. This drew a look of disgust from his aunt, but Monty couldn't take his eyes off Sirius Black, a wizard on muggle news. It was mad.

The newscaster reappeared. “The Ministry of Agriculture...”

“Hang on!” Uncle Vernon shouted. “You didn’t tell us where that maniac’s escaped from! What use is that? Lunatic could be coming up the street right now!”

Uncle Vernon didn’t know how right he was. Monty was frozen in his seat. His relatives had no chance against a wizard, none at all. Aunt Petunia was already looking worriedly out of a window. Did she know?

“When will they learn,” said Uncle Vernon, banging emphatically on the table, “that hanging’s the only way to deal with these people?”

“That wouldn’t work,” Monty said, then cursed himself for the slip.

Uncle Vernon turned his glare on Monty. “What do you mean, boy?”

Aunt Petunia was watching him too. Monty shook his head and went back to his cornflakes. Maybe he could talk to her about it. She was more reasonable than his uncle.

Uncle Vernon checked his watch then tossed back the rest of his tea. “I’d better be off in a minute, Petunia. Marge’s train gets in at ten.”

Monty really did start choking on his cornflakes.

“Aunt Marge?” he wheezed. “She’s not coming here, is she?”

Uncle Vernon leaned forward with a cruel expression. “Marge’ll be here for a week. And while we’re on the subject, we need to get a few things straight before I go and collect her.”

Monty’s head spun. A Death Eater on the loose. Aunt Marge for a week. He wouldn’t survive. He barely heard the demands his uncle made of him.

“...and thirdly, we’ve told Marge you attend St. Brutus’ Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys.”

“You what?” Monty said.

“And you’ll be sticking to that story, boy, or there’ll be trouble!”

Monty sat numbly as his uncle finally took the finger out of his face and made to leave. He looked at his soggy cereal, wondering what he could possibly do in this situation. Harry had said it wasn’t safe to travel. But he had *also* said he might be able to visit him.

After Aunt Petunia herded Dudley upstairs to smarten up for his profligate aunt, Monty retreated to his own room and began composing a letter.

Once Hedwig was out of sight, Monty grabbed his Hogsmeade permission form and a pen, and sought out Aunt Petunia. She was in the kitchen, washing dishes.

“What is it?” she said when she noticed him.

“That man on the news is a wizard,” Monty said bluntly. “He’s escaped from Azkaban. That’s —”

“I know what that is,” she snapped, turning to look at him. She had gone white as a sheet.

“He worked for Voldemort, the wizard who killed my parents.”

“I know who he is,” she said quietly.

“I don’t think it’s safe for me to stay here,” Monty said. “I’ve owled—sent a letter—to someone I know. I could go somewhere else for a while.”

Aunt Petunia shook her head. “You’re supposed to stay here.”

“It’s dangerous,” Monty insisted. “I can’t do magic—”

“Don’t use that word!”

“I can’t do *that* here. I should go stay with *my kind*.”

Aunt Petunia turned off the tap, bracing her hands on the counter. “You left on your birthday last year, and it was fine.”

“So you do remember what day it is,” Monty said bitterly.

“Of course I do,” she said, recovering some of her usual attitude. “Yes, you leaving might be for the best. Particularly if Marge is around.”

“It’ll take a few hours to hear back,” Monty said. “I’ve also got this form for school I need signed.”

Aunt Petunia shook her head absently, still pale and nervous, and took the pen Monty held out to her. He knew the mention of magic would make her too distracted to pay attention to what she was signing. When she was done she went back to the dishes. Monty took his signed form and went upstairs to pack. Whether Harry could help him or not, he still needed to hide all evidence he was a wizard lest Aunt Marge do a surprise inspection of his room. Errol was still asleep in Hedwig’s cage. Monty had no idea what to do with him, he’d just flown all the way from Egypt. Maybe he could claim it was a holiday project, wild animal rehabilitation. That was a thing, right?

Soon, Aunt Petunia was calling him downstairs to greet Aunt Marge. At his aunt’s behest, Monty opened the door to welcome Aunt Marge, who had brought her old dog Ripper with her. Icing on the cake; Monty loathed that dog and the feeling was mutual.

“Where’s my Dudders?” Aunt Marge demanded. “Where’s my neffy-poo?”

She shoved her suitcase into Monty’s stomach, and he grabbed it before it fell. He’d probably get knocked in the head with it if that happened. He hauled the suitcase upstairs without complaint. Hopefully he wouldn’t have to endure Aunt Marge for long.

Harry didn't think he'd pick up Percy's habit of polishing his prefect badge, but it was still fun to look at. He'd brought it to breakfast to show his dad, who of course already knew.

"Thanks," Harry said, accepting a cup of coffee.

"You were the least annoying choice," his dad said.

Harry snorted. "Who's the other one?"

His dad looked at him.

"Least annoying?" Harry said. "Must be Jasmine."

His dad turned back to the *Daily Prophet*.

"And Astrid's been made quidditch captain," Harry said, smiling. "Thank you. It means a lot to her."

"No one could argue against her qualifications," his dad said. "I didn't realize you knew enough about quidditch to compile player statistics."

"That was mostly Cassius," Harry admitted. "I just organized things."

"And testimonials from Viridia Lestrangle and Madam Hooch," his dad said. "Not to mention the training program she is currently in. Even if McGonagall wants Gryffindor to win, she doesn't want to cripple that girl's career. She's already unhappy with the Ginevra Weasley situation."

Harry shrugged. He didn't know how much Ginny cared about quidditch, but you didn't need to be on the school team to play it.

Iseult, the long-eared owl, flew in through the window and settled on her perch. His dad gave him a knowing look.

"I didn't say it was from me," Harry said. "I don't think he's ever got a birthday present before."

His dad shook his head. "I need to begin purchasing ingredients for a year's supply of Wolfsbane today. Obviously purchasing them all at once would make it apparent what I'm brewing to any sufficiently knowledgeable apothecary, particularly those who supply Wolfsbane themselves. I'll need to split the purchases across multiple apothecaries."

"Did you want me to help?" Harry asked. "I can go to the ones in Knockturn."

"Wearing a prefect badge?"

Harry scoffed. "I'm not going to wear it all the time, I'm not Percy."

"Percy?"

"I mean Weasley," Harry said quickly. "The one that's Head Boy?"

His dad lowered the paper. "And how did you come across that information?"

Harry's mind completely blanked out. "I—"

A phoenix patronus burst into the kitchen. "Severus, an intruder has been detected at Privet Drive. I've already told Arabella you're coming through."

Harry's embarrassment was replaced by fear as the patronus faded like mist in the morning sun. His dad swiftly left the room.

"Stay here," he said, tossing floo powder into the fireplace and calling out, "Number 7 Privet Drive."

Harry's wand was in his hand. He wanted to follow but knew it was a stupid idea. Why, on Monty's birthday? Had Sirius Black broke out to kill him on his birthday? A thirteenth birthday, moreover. What the fuck was going on?

Severus strode into Arabella Figg's cat-infested home to find the woman tying a bonnet on.

"Oh, good, you're here," she said. "I was just about to take a stroll and see what's going on."

"Is it Black?"

She waved her hand. "It's Vernon's sister, Marge. She hates the boy. Still, best make sure. Come along, professor. Accompany an old lady."

Mrs. Figg chuckled to herself as she left the house, cats meowing their disapproval. Severus disillusioned himself and followed her as she crossed the street then slowly made her way up the sidewalk. It was half ten on a Saturday, and people were in their gardens enjoying the fair weather. A few people greeted Mrs. Figg, who definitely stood out in Little Whinging, a poor woman in a middle class suburb. Maybe it was easier for squibs to forget about magic in such humdrum places.

Mrs. Figg slowed further as they neared Number 4.

"Oh, I've got Colonel Fubster managing them!" a voice boomed, startling a nearby bird into flight.

"That's Marge," Mrs. Figg whispered, inching towards a window.

“So! Still here, are you!”

“Yes,” Severus heard Potter say in a subdued voice, unlike the boy he was familiar with.

“Don’t say *yes* in that ungrateful tone!”

“Sounds normal,” Mrs. Figg said, shuffling away. “I’ll just go round the block, then back home.”

Severus let her walk off, lingering by the window and listening as *Aunt Marge* continued to berate the boy. So his aunt and uncle had decided that a *first-rate institution for hopeless cases* was a good cover story for Hogwarts. Preposterous. He saw the woman, who looked remarkably like her brother, clutching a grizzled old dog that Potter kept a wary distance from. He cast a few spells to make sure the woman was who she claimed to be, concluding that no one would be able to pick up any of her mannerisms without spending extensive time in her company, an unlikely event. Certainly not something a man just out of Azkaban was up to.

Something was off with Potter. He kept wincing when bending or twisting. Had he been injured?

Severus returned to Mrs. Figg’s house, satisfied Potter was in no immediate magical danger. He needed to tell Harry. And Dumbledore, obviously.

Once Mrs. Figg made it back home, Severus followed her inside and let the disillusionment fall.

“I’d set a few cats out, but Petunia always chases them off,” Mrs. Figg said. “They can’t get too close. They’re half-kneazles, you know. Quite intelligent. The kittens are just about ready to be adopted. Would you like to see them?”

Severus was tempted to say no, but he hesitated. He hadn’t got his son a gift for being made prefect. Thinking back, it seemed to be a common practice. Harry had his babelfish, which was fascinating but not very interactive. He didn’t have an owl, but Severus didn’t think Harry would like one. He’d probably prefer a pigeon. He *had* seen Harry petting stray cats around Cokeworth, and the boy himself said he liked cats.

“I would like to see the kittens,” Severus decided, a sentence he had never uttered in his entire life. “Half-kneazles, you say?”

Harry waited anxiously by the fireplace, wand in hand, ready to leap through the floo if his dad didn’t come back soon. He didn’t care if the headmaster knew. Monty’s life was more important. He’d taken a Calming Draught and ran through occlumency exercises as he waited, his anxiety growing and growing.

The fire burned green, and his dad stepped through.

“False alarm,” he said, holding something small, grey, and fluffy out to Harry. Harry held out his hands and accepted it.

It was a kitten. A grey kitten with bright green eyes.

“It is a half-kneazle female,” his dad said. “Congratulations on becoming a prefect. I am proud of you.”

The kitten meowed at him, and Harry gently held her to his chest. He had always wanted a cat.

“Thank you, dad. Does she have a name?”

“No,” his dad said, walking into the kitchen. “That is for you to determine.”

Harry looked at his kitten. She looked back at him. He wiped his eyes. She meowed again.

“My name’s Harry,” he said, walking into the kitchen to finish his breakfast. “And your name is to be determined.”

Harry walked through Knockturn Alley with a kitten hidden in his cloak. He’d got about half of what his dad needed him to, splitting it up across different apothecaries. He needed to get supplies for his kitten, which his dad had given him money for. His kitten would eventually be able to hunt for herself, but even when she reached that point Harry would still need a regular supply of food, not to mention a litter box, litter, cat toys, a carrier, a scratching post, perhaps an entire tower, cat beds—

An owl landed on his head.

His kitten meowed.

Harry stuck out an arm and the owl hopped onto it. It was Hedwig, with a letter for him. He took it from her beak, then she returned to roost on his head, making it clear she wasn’t leaving until she got a reply.

Harry moved to the side of the street, trusting Hedwig to keep anyone nosy at bay, and unfolded the letter.

Dear Harry,

Thank you for the gift! Hedwig's excited for me to learn some owl spells. I never knew there were spells for owls!

I saw Sirius Black on the muggle news this morning. And my Uncle Vernon's sister, Aunt Marge, has come to stay for a week with her dog Ripper. Me and her don't get on. I know you said I shouldn't go off on my own, but I really don't think I can stay here. Do you think you could help me get to the Leaky Cauldron? Ron's in Egypt, and Hermione's in France, and Luna's somewhere that starts with the letter S, but I reckon I could get a room at the Leaky until school starts.

If you can't, that's okay. I can manage to get there on my own.

Monty

Harry folded up the letter and stuffed it into a pocket.

Me and her don't get on.

Harry knew what *not getting on* with the Dursleys meant. It meant getting hit and going hungry and being locked in a cupboard. What did *Aunt Marge* do? What about this *Ripper* character?

The Leaky Cauldron?

"It's going to be a while until I can write back," he told Hedwig. I need to finish my shopping."

Hedwig hooted in acknowledgement, and Harry started walking again.

Harry returned home with more animals than he had left with.

"What is that owl doing on your head?" Severus asked.

"Sleeping," Harry said, readjusting his bag. His cloak emitted a tiny *meow*.

Harry carried the owl, a snowy owl which Severus knew was Monty Potter's, to Iseult's vacant perch. Iseult was currently carrying an order to an apothecary he knew in France.

"Shall I put the ingredients down in the lab?" Harry asked.

"I've moved a few things around," he said, leading his son into the basement. "The Wolfsbane Potion isn't stable, and cannot be stored for long periods of time."

“Yeah, I noticed I had to buy quicksilver,” Harry said. “I thought they stopped using that in medicine ages ago.”

“Muggle medicine,” Severus said, opening the door to his potions lab. “We can digest things muggles cannot.”

He watched as Harry carefully put away the ingredients. Severus wished his son shared his interest in potions, but Harry had cultivated his own interest in spellcrafting. They had that in common. It was dangerous work, but he was certain Harry would be adept at it.

“There are some components which can be prepared beforehand,” he said once Harry was finished. “I’d like you to make the blue mass.”

“I thought that’s what it was,” Harry said, smiling faintly. “That explains the chalk, to stop him from throwing it back up.”

“It’s not poisonous,” Severus said. “Merely unpalatable.”

Harry didn’t look convinced. “Right. Monty’s sent me a letter. He doesn’t want to stay with the Dursleys. I think that other aunt of his is as bad as his uncle.”

Severus nodded. He’d had that impression too, both from Mrs. Figg and his observations. “Where does your brother plan to stay?”

“The Leaky Cauldron,” Harry said. “He could stay with me instead.”

Severus frowned at the conflicted look on his son’s face. He could help hide evidence of Harry’s relation to his brother, but there was the risk of someone looking for Severus and seeing Potter nearby. And with Black on the loose he might track Potter, leading him to Harry. The Leaky Cauldron wasn’t a place for a child to stay on their own, even for only a week.

“How about this,” he said, an idea forming.

Monty was desperate to escape Aunt Marge. She was relentless. Comparing him to Dudley, criticizing him, saying he needed to be caned more, on and on, with Ripper drooling and growling at her side. He kept checking the sky for Hedwig, but it would have been a bad idea for her to return during the day. He had been surprised to find a blue and yellow macaw in his room when he went to the toilet after lunch. He’d only been checking on Errol, who was sleeping.

The macaw had been carrying a gift from Luna, whose letter informed him she was currently in Suriname—that would have been his next guess—helping her dad look for duppies, which sounded similar to poltergeists in their behavior but weren’t corporeal. She had sent him a drawing of Hedwig. Monty didn’t know how Luna knew his birthdate, but he supposed it was

common knowledge. He gave the macaw a thank you letter to take back, and asked Luna when her birthday was.

At the moment, Monty was thinking about his broom servicing kit, exiled to his trunk due to Aunt Marge, and sitting in the living room while the adults drank and talked. Dudley was watching television, as usual. It was immensely dull.

There was a knock at the door.

“Who in blazes is knocking at this hour?” Uncle Vernon growled.

“Boy,” Aunt Marge said, snapping her fingers at him. “Get the door for your uncle. Ungrateful runt...”

Monty quickly got up and went to the front door, his heart racing. He opened the door and sagged in relief when he saw Harry standing there. Dressed as a muggle too. Monty couldn’t imagine what his aunt and uncle would say if one of his friends showed up in robes.

“Happy Birthday,” Harry said, smiling at him. “I’m here to kidnap you.”

“Really?” Monty said.

Harry nodded. “Get your things. You can tell your family—”

“Who is it, boy?” Uncle Vernon shouted.

“Tell them I’m a prefect from school,” Harry said, leaning in to whisper. “I’m picking you up for a wilderness boot camp.”

Monty nodded, then went back to the living room to explain.

“Well?” Aunt Marge said. “Answer him!”

“It’s a prefect from St. Brutus’,” Monty said. “He’s here to pick me up for the boot camp. Remember, Aunt Petunia?”

Aunt Petunia froze like a deer in headlights, then nodded vigorously. “Oh, yes. We’ve got a note from the school. The boy’s a special case, particularly incurable.”

Uncle Vernon looked suspicious, but quickly fell in with Aunt Petunia.

“Well, bring him in here!” Aunt Marge said. “Let’s get a look at him!”

That was...not ideal, but Monty couldn’t tell her no. Hopefully Harry wouldn’t mind. Monty waved him over, and Harry walked into the living room.

“Good evening,” he said, smiling politely at the collection of Dursleys. “My name is Harry Evans, I’m a prefect at St. Brutus’.”

Monty glanced at Harry nervously. He was wearing all black, and had a hoodie on with something in the pocket. The pocket moved, and Monty held his breath, waiting for someone to point it out. No one did. Harry had also got his ears pierced, black like everything else. And nail varnish? That would sell the criminal bit. Harry was, at least to Monty, very obviously magical. Yet the Dursleys didn't comment on Harry's appearance at all.

"You're a prefect at St. Brutus', boy?" Aunt Marge said, looking Harry up and down.

"Yes, ma'am. A fifth-year. Headmistress Trunchbull has us picking up the more intractable students. He'll be carrying all his belongings from here to the campsite."

Aunt Marge nodded approvingly. "Excellent. I like the sound of this Trunchbull."

Monty bit his lips to contain his laughter.

"Well, Potter?" Harry asked, turning to him. "Why aren't you already packed? Get a move on."

Monty nodded, then hurried away, feeling a little bad for leaving Harry to the wolves. He went to his room, waking Errol and carrying him to the window, suggesting he take his time getting back to Egypt. His trunk was already packed, so he heaved it out of his room and downstairs. Harry was still in the living room, answering every question Aunt Marge shot at him and coming up with increasingly ridiculous answers.

"They tied my hand to the desk until I could write properly."

"The cane? No, Headmistress prefers a crop. She says if we act like animals, we deserve to be treated like animals."

"Potter's seen the inside of the Chokey a fair few times. Some people never learn."

"Potter nicked a piece of the headmistress' cake from the kitchens. She had him eat the rest in front of the entire school. He was in hospital for a week."

"I'm ready," Monty said, breathing heavily. His trunk really was awfully heavy.

Harry looked over his shoulder and gave him a quick smile, then turned back to the Dursleys. "I'm glad to have had the chance to have spoken with you. Clearly your efforts have been wasted on Potter. Don't worry. We'll shape him up, or he'll die trying."

"Do what you want with the boy," Uncle Vernon said airily, clearly having enjoyed the number of fictitious punishments Monty had been subjected to. "We've done the best we can."

"Have a lovely evening," Harry said, turning back to Monty. "Keep up, Potter. No dawdling."

Monty didn't trust himself to speak, so he dragged his trunk after Harry, through the front door, and onto the street. He was free.

Once they were out of sight of Number 4, Harry picked up the other end of his trunk and helped carry. “Is there a side street we can summon the Knight Bus at?”

“This way,” Monty said, turning towards Wisteria Walk. “Where are we going?”

“To the Leaky,” Harry said. “I reckon we could stay there until that Marge woman leaves.”

“We?” Monty asked, turning down the alley that led to Magnolia Crescent. “Is here fine?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, looking around. “And yes, we. I told you about Black. He’s in Azkaban for blowing up a dozen muggles in broad daylight. Who knows what he’s like after being there twelve years.”

There was a *meow* from Harry’s hoodie pocket.

“Do you have a cat?” Monty asked.

“I just got her,” Harry said, smiling. “You can meet her later. Get your invisibility cloak on. The first step is sneaking you onto the bus. Don’t worry, I’ve got loads of practice.”

Wake Up and Smell the Cat Food

Chapter Summary

July/August 1993

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Severus scowled into his wine glass, questioning why he had agreed to this.

It was because of his son, naturally. Confunding Mrs. Figg, muggle-repellent charms, that nonsense at the Leaky Cauldron. And now he was having an intimate dinner with Rubeus Hagrid, Argus Filch, Mrs. Norris, and Albus Dumbledore.

He took another gulp of wine as Hagrid laughed raucously at something. Kettleburn had given Dumbledore his notice and hobbled off for parts unknown. Remus Lupin and Rubeus Hagrid, Severus' new colleagues.

Severus was glad his son wasn't taking Care of Magical Creatures. He'd be stitching him back together.

Harry dragged his brother's trunk off the Knight Bus. He was mildly surprised Louis Gage was no longer the conductor, but he supposed it was a temporary sort of job. Instead, there was Stan Shunpike, who Harry only vaguely remembered from school. Hufflepuff, maybe? He wasn't sure.

The Leaky Cauldron was busy, which was fine for his purposes. He charmed Monty's trunk lighter and carried it upstairs, smiling as his invisible brother picked up the other end. Outside of Room 11, Harry fished the key out of his pocket and unlocked the door, shuddering as he stepped through the layers of protective charms his dad had cast earlier.

"It's just spells," Harry whispered, stepping further into the room. The door shut and Monty took off his cloak. "Protection charms."

"Is all the secrecy really necessary?" Monty asked.

"I did tip Stan a galleon," Harry said, glad the new conductor of the Knight Bus was more amenable to bribery. "And I think so. Everyone knows who you are. If one person sees you in

Diagon Alley, word will spread.”

He carried Monty’s trunk over to the large four poster bed and set it at the foot. He turned back to look at his brother, and saw him staring at the table.

“Is that...for me?” Monty asked.

Hedwig hooted from where she sat next to a chocolate cake.

“It’s your birthday, isn’t it?” Harry said with a smile. He snapped his fingers, and the candles lit up.

“I’ve never had a birthday cake before,” Monty said, walking forward in a daze.

Harry kept smiling, despite the mingled anger and sadness he felt. The Dursleys couldn’t be decent enough to get his brother a cake? He didn’t understand it.

His dad had told him about the blood bond Monty had with their aunt, how in the Dursley household he was safe from Voldemort. He knew the headmaster got alerts when someone other than the residents entered the home, and about Mrs. Figg's spying. None of that kept Monty safe from the Dursleys themselves.

“There’s a first time for everything,” Harry said, putting a hand in his hoodie pocket to pet his kitten. She began to purr. “Did you already have dinner?”

Monty nodded absently, still staring at the cake. It wasn’t anything special, Harry had just picked it up from a bakery. He would have preferred to bake it himself, but there had been a lot of arrangements to make.

“I’ve got this for you too,” Harry said, reaching into another pocket and pulling out a jar. “It’s Bruisewort Balm.” He handed it to a confused Monty.

“What’s it for?” Monty asked.

“It’s for bruises, and other injuries from blunt force,” Harry said. His dad hadn’t gone into details, but had said Monty might have been injured in some way by his relatives. “Like if you get hit by a bludger.”

“Thank you,” Monty said, accepting it. “Did you make it?”

“I did, actually,” Harry said, guiding Monty to the table. “I’ve been helping make potions for the hospital wing this summer, and the one before.”

“Like a summer job?” Monty asked, sitting down.

“Exactly,” Harry said, passing a knife to Monty. “Since it’s your birthday, you get to cut.”

Monty took the knife, bemused. “And blow the candles out.”

“Make a wish, then blow the candles out,” Harry said.

Monty nodded, closed his eyes, then blew out the candles. Harry clapped.

“Now I just cut it?” Monty asked, looking slightly embarrassed.

“Pretty much,” Harry said. “My gran took the candles out first and gave them to me so I could have the frosting, and she’d save them for the next year.”

Harry watched as the cake was de-candled and Monty carefully cut into it.

“Owls can’t have chocolate,” he said, reaching into another pocket, “so I’ve got a vole for Hedwig.”

He tossed the dead vole to Hedwig, who caught it in her beak and flew to top of the wardrobe to eat.

“I should probably clean my hands after touching that,” Harry muttered, getting his wand out and casting a little *scourgify*.

“How much do you keep in your pockets?” Monty asked, passing him a slice of cake.

“Tons of things,” Harry said. “I’ve charmed them to hold more. We can do the same to yours. Actually, we should probably go into London and get some clothes for you. And for me,” he added. Harry had transfigured his clothes as he had got a bit taller, but transfiguration could only do so much.

It was surreal, eating cake with his brother on his brother’s birthday. Harry had never imagined such a thing happening. It didn’t seem possible.

“You’re staying here too?” Monty asked as they ate.

“I’m in the room next door,” Harry said. “You can bang on the wall if you need me. Is there anything you wanted to do for your birthday? There’s a few hours left.”

Monty shifted in his seat. “I don’t know, I’ve never done anything.”

“What about flying?” Harry suggested.

“In here?” Monty asked incredulously.

“Well, you could,” Harry said. “Not that there’s much room for it. I meant in Diagon Alley.”

“Is that allowed?” Monty asked.

“I don’t see why it wouldn’t be,” Harry said. “People get around on brooms all the time. As long as you stay in Diagon Alley and avoid crashing into anything, no one’s going to complain.”

Harry held back a smile as his brother hurriedly finished his slice of cake, threw open his trunk, and pulled out his Nimbus. Soon Harry was hanging out of the window, watching his brother soar above the rooftops, wand in hand, ready to catch him if he fell.

Harry sat in the dining room of the Leaky Cauldron, waiting for his brother. It was the morning after Monty's birthday, and he had flown late into the night. Harry wished he had a broom, just a little.

When Monty had returned, Harry had, with his permission, cast a few cosmetic charms to alter his appearance. Brown hair long enough to cover his scar, brown eyes, square glasses. He still looked like Monty Potter, if one actually knew what his face looked like.

Harry smiled as his brother sat across from him. Monty moved quietly for a teenager, probably due to years of being shouted at to be quiet.

"Good morning," Monty said, looking happily around the pub.

"Morning," Harry said. "I've ordered fry-ups for us both, I hope that's alright."

Monty nodded, then paused. "Are you paying for all of this?"

"Don't worry about it," Harry said. Truthfully, his dad was paying for everything, which was a little embarrassing. Harry had agreed to help his dad out with something during the school year, though, so it balanced out.

Two owls flew to their table, depositing a *Daily Prophet* and a letter for Harry. He picked up the letter first.

"It's from Cedric," he said to Monty's curious look. Harry opened the letter and quickly read it. "He's a prefect too." Harry wasn't sure what to think about it, but it was pretty obvious out of the Hufflepuffs Cedric was the best choice.

"So you're actually a prefect?" Monty asked.

"I am," Harry said.

"Wow, congratulations," Monty said.

Harry's kitten mewled, and he pulled her out of his pocket. She yawned, blinking sleepily at him.

"I need a name for you," Harry said, settling her on his lap as their food was delivered. "So, do you want to get your school things first? May as well get it out of the way."

"That sounds like a good idea," Monty said, staring at the piles of food they had been given, like it was the first real meal he had seen in ages. Toast shimmering with butter, baked beans, fried eggs with golden yolks and crisp edges, blistered sausage, grilled tomatoes. Tom, the proprietor, had also brought a small dish with ground up meat and bones for his kitten, which Harry sat on his lap for her.

“Hagrid sent me a weird book,” Monty said. “It bit me.”

“I’d like to see that,” Harry said, scratching his kitten’s ears then starting on his own food. “What options did you pick?”

“I’m doing Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, and Muggle Studies,” Monty said, glancing at Harry.

Harry was a little thrown Monty had chosen the same classes as their mum. Not that Monty would have known unless anyone had told him. “Muggle Studies?”

“Percy suggested it,” Monty said. “He said it’s not just for people from magical households, since the professor spends time talking about wizarding culture too, and comparing it to muggles. It sounds...useful.”

“It does,” Harry said. “I wish I had thought of that.” Then again, when Harry had started Hogwarts Quirrell had been the Muggle Studies professor. “Why’d you choose Care and Divination?”

To Harry’s surprise, the question made his brother blush. “I wanted to learn more about creatures, and, well, Divination sounded easy. I mean, it could help find, um, things, right?”

“I guess,” Harry said, feeling like he was missing something. “I wouldn’t say Divination is easy, though. There’s a lot of interpretation, and deciding which divination medium to use. You’ve got to know what you’re doing to get anything out of it. My mate Cassius takes it really seriously.”

Monty nodded, looking relieved. Did he think Harry would be upset about his classes?

“You’ve got your supply list?” Harry asked once their meal was finished. The kitten was sleeping hers off in his pocket.

Monty nodded. “But I’ve got to go to Gringotts first.”

“Same,” Harry said, standing up. “I’ve got to exchange my promissory note.”

“What’s that?” Monty asked, following Harry to the courtyard. Harry tapped the right brick, watching as the small hole appeared, expanding to reveal the bright and bustling Diagon Alley. It never got old.

“I have an allowance from the school,” Harry said, starting down the street. “Because I’m poor.”

“Oh,” Monty said, looking around Diagon Alley. The witches and wizards in their colorful robes and fanciful hats, owls flying, toads croaking, all manner of magical and wonderful things out in the open.

“Should we have worn robes?” Monty asked uncertainly.

“We’re muggleborns,” Harry said. “That’s what I told Tom back at the Leaky. Parents dropped us off for the rest of summer. They won’t expect us to dress like them, since muggleborns are ignorant of wizarding ways. Besides that, most younger witches and wizards wear clothes that look muggle-ish. Like your friend Ron. We can get away with it.”

At Gringotts, Harry exchanged his promissory note for his yearly fifty galleons while Monty was taken down to his vault. Back in Diagon Alley, they visited the usual places. Robes, parchment, potions ingredients which Harry helped pick. Strangely, Monty didn’t have anything on his list for Divination. No tarot cards or crystal balls, no tea leaves or rune stones. They agreed the professor must be providing the supplies, though Harry encouraged Monty to get his own once he found what he resonated with.

Their last stop was Flourish and Blotts. Harry hesitated before following his brother in, glaring at the stack of *Hunting Werewolves*.

“Do you not like this shop?” Monty asked, looking at Harry with concern.

“I don’t like they’re promoting hunting people with lycanthropy down like rabid animals,” Harry said lightly, grimly amused that the window display had been replaced by a large iron cage filled with hundreds of copies of *The Monster Book of Monsters* viciously fighting each other. “See how they treat those books?”

“That’s the one Hagrid got for me,” Monty said, also watching the books tearing each other apart.

“I bet if they treated them nicely, the books would act right,” Harry said.

A manager came out wearing a pair of thick gloves. “Hogwarts?” he asked them.

“Yes,” Harry said, watching as the manager picked up a large stick and cautiously approached the cage. “Just one copy.”

“Actually,” Monty began, but Harry shook his head.

“I kind of want one,” he whispered, watching as the frazzled manager beat off the aggressive books, struggling to get one out.

“Here,” the manager said, thrusting the book at Harry. Harry took it, narrowly avoiding his fingers getting bitten off.

“There, there,” he said, patting the book gently. Curious if it really was like an animal, Harry scratched the book’s spine. The book shivered and settled down.

The manager gaped at him. “How did you do that?”

“If you stick a bunch of animals in a cage together, they’re going to start fighting,” Harry said, watching as two of the books cornered a third. The manager ran over and beat them apart. Harry exchanged looks with Monty, rethinking whether he wanted to give Flourish and Blotts any of his money.

The manager grumbled something, then shook his head. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

As the manager helped Monty get the books on his list, Harry looked around, absently petting his *Monster* book. He picked up a copy of *Death Omens: What to Do When You Know the Worst is Coming* for his Defense class, which was an odd choice but went with the creatures they were covering that year. He was amused to see his brother’s Muggle Studies texts included a stack of comic books.

When they were done shopping, Harry and Monty went to the cafe across the street from Flourish and Blotts, where Harry had gone with Percy once. They ordered sandwiches, butterbeer—which Monty had never had—coffee, a few pastries, and carried it to a table outside.

“Have you thought of a name for your cat yet?” Monty asked as they sat down to eat.

Harry pulled his kitten out, who meowed in protest at being woken up again. He had stayed up rather late thinking about names for his kitten. “Well, she’s grey. And fluffy. And she has that new kitten smell.”

“What?” Monty asked, laughing.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know how else to describe it. She kind of reminds me of Aunt Beast.”

His kitten meowed again. She was only a few months old, she had no idea what was going on.

“Who’s that?” Monty asked.

“It’s from a book,” Harry said. “But she’s too young to be an aunt,” Harry continued, picking up a madeleine to nibble on. He froze, then stared at the little shell-shaped sponge cake. “I think Madeleine would work.”

Harry smiled down at his kitten, who yawned and curled up. “Lady Madeleine.”

“You’re naming your cat after a cake?”

Harry looked up at his brother. “It’s cute. Like her.”

Monty shook his head, then went back to eating.

Monty sat on his bed, his broom care kit spread around him, watching Harry dangle a string in front of Lady Madeleine, who clumsily leapt after it. Harry had wanted to reintroduce his kitten to Hedwig, who graciously groomed the kitten's ears in acceptance. It had been a long

day, and the Leaky Cauldron was packed for dinner. They'd taken their meals to Monty's room.

He'd been wanting to ask Harry about Sirius Black all day. Harry's letter had said he wanted to talk in person. Well, that he'd *prefer* to talk about it in person. Monty suspected there was a lot more to Sirius Black than being one of Voldemort's followers. He knew plenty of former Death Eaters had evaded Azkaban and were living their lives like nothing had happened, and none of them had gone after him. What was special about Sirius Black? Why was Harry so worried about him?

"Can I ask you a question?" Monty asked, watching as Harry pulled the string out of Lady Madeleine's kitten claws.

"You may," Harry said, smiling slightly.

"Could you tell me about Sirius Black?"

The string stopped moving, and Lady Madeleine successfully captured it, rolling around and tangling herself up.

"Right," Harry said, picking up the kitten and sitting in a chair. He had a pained expression, but his face quickly cleared. "I'm not going to lie to you, it's really bad."

"Do you not want to talk about it?" Monty asked, torn between his curiosity and concern for Harry. He didn't like not being told things. So many big things about his own life had been hidden from him.

"I'm worried about how you'll react," Harry said, unwinding the string from Lady Madeleine. "Sirius Black is a dangerous man. He's most likely very insane. I mentioned yesterday, but he blew up a dozen muggles in the middle of London, in broad daylight. He also killed a wizard named Peter Pettigrew. Trying to confront him on your own..."

Harry shook his head, setting Lady Madeleine back on the floor. She wobbled towards where Hedwig was perched.

"Why would I do that?" Monty asked, even more confused.

Harry sighed, then said, "Because he was friends with your parents. And he betrayed them."

Monty sat, frozen with shock, as Harry told him about Sirius Black.

"From what I've learned," Harry said, "most people in the Black family were dark witches and wizards. Sirius Black was probably the only one to be sorted into Gryffindor. He became best mates with your dad almost immediately. Him, and two others named Peter Pettigrew and Remus Lupin. He joined the fight against Voldemort as soon as he was out of school, along with your parents, whereas the rest of his family were either Death Eaters or at least sympathetic to Voldemort. Everyone thought he was loyal to your dad, to both of your parents."

Monty nodded slowly. If Sirius Black *was* Harry's dad, and friends with Monty's dad...

“For some reason, the...Voldemort targeted your family, and they went into hiding,” Harry continued. “They used a spell called the Fidelius Charm. It hides a secret in someone’s soul. That person is called a secret-keeper. Your parents put their home under Fidelius.” Harry closed his eyes and took a breath, his arms wrapping around himself. “They made Sirius Black their secret-keeper. Because he was their best friend, and they trusted him.”

“You mean,” Monty said, his shock turning to anger, “he told Voldemort? He’s why Voldemort knew where to find us?”

Harry nodded, an anguished look on his face. “Then...what happened to you happened. Sirius Black must have gone completely mad, because Peter Pettigrew ended up confronting him, accusing him of betraying your parents. Then Sirius Black blew him up. When the aurors found him, he was surrounded by dead bodies, laughing.”

Monty’s mind reeled. Why hadn’t anyone told him? Why hadn’t anyone told him his parents had died because a friend betrayed them? Hagrid, Dumbledore, McGonagall. Did his aunt know? She lied about his parents dying in a car crash, why not that?

“There’s more,” Harry said, startling him. “Sirius Black is your godfather.”

The tea pot exploded. Hedwig shrieked, and Lady Madeleine fled under the bed.

“Sorry,” Monty said dully, watching as Harry took out his wand, muttering a spell to repair the tea pot and vanish the tea. “I just...”

“You’re upset,” Harry said, putting his wand away. “I know, I would be too.”

Lady Madeleine crept out from under the bed, looked around cautiously, then scampered over to Harry. Harry picked up her, putting her back into his pocket.

“I’ll give you some space,” Harry said, standing up. “It’s a lot. Do me a favor, though. Don’t bother going after him. If my suspicions are correct, he’ll be looking for you.”

“What, he’s coming to finish the job?” Monty said acidly.

Harry sighed. “That’s what I’m afraid of. If you need me, you know what to do.”

Harry saw himself out of the room, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Monty stared at the wall. His parents were dead. Voldemort had murdered them, but he wouldn’t have even been able to find them if Sirius Black hadn’t told him. Sirius Black, who was best mates with his dad. Monty would never betray his friends like that. He would rather die. They meant everything to him. His parents made Sirius Black his godfather. They trusted him with their lives, with his own life.

Was that why Harry was so nice? Did he feel guilty for what his dad had done?

Monty got up suddenly, hurrying over to his trunk. He tossed things aside, not caring where they landed, and pulled out the photo album Hagrid had given him at the end of first year. He flipped through to a picture of his parents’ wedding.

There he was. Sirius Black. Smiling, laughing, as if he wasn't a traitor.

Monty slammed the album shut, slumping against his trunk. Harry was right. He didn't need to chase Black down. He had the entire Ministry against him.

Monty's expression hardened.

If Black *was* coming after him, he would be ready.

Chapter End Notes

Someone mentioned Camazotz in a comment a few days ago, not long after I'd settled on a name for the kitten, and I was like, how did they know...

I did like all of your suggestions, Matilda would have been really cute!

Salad Days

Chapter Summary

August 1993

Harry was on his bed, holding Lady Madeleine above him, singing softly to her.

“The words I’m singing now mean nothing more than *meow* to an animal...”

Her Ladyship meowed at him, and he smiled.

Harry had gone down early to ask Tom to send breakfast up, knowing his brother would need more time to come to terms with the revelations about Sirius Black. Harry had known for years, and still seethed with anger at the thought of the traitor.

There was a knock at the door and Harry sat up, setting Lady Madeleine on his bed. He opened the door, expecting to find a tray waiting for him, but it was Monty.

“Can I come in?” Monty asked. He looked like he hadn't slept at all.

Harry stood back to let Monty through, then quickly shut the door behind him.

“It’s different from mine,” Monty said, looking around.

“You mean the spells?” Harry asked. “I’m not the one he’s after.”

Monty gave him a strange look. “Wouldn’t he want to see you?”

“Why would he?” Harry asked, puzzled. “He doesn’t even know I exist.”

For some reason, this made Monty look sad. But then he shook his head and gave Harry a determined look.

“Can you teach me magic?” Monty asked.

There was another knock at the door. Harry opened it and took the two trays the maid had brought up. Harry shut the door again and carried them to the table.

“You mean defensive magic?” Harry asked. “I can, though I’m not sure how much we’ll get done in a week.”

“I’m not going back to the Dursleys,” Monty declared

Harry sighed and sat down. He thought Monty might say that. “That’s fine.”

“I can pay,” Monty said.

Harry shook his head. “We can worry about that later. Sit down and eat, and tell me what spells you already know.”

Monty wanted to start right away, but Harry demurred.

“You need clothes that fit,” he said to Monty as they walked away from the Leaky Cauldron and into muggle London. “Imagine you’re trying to dodge a spell and you trip because your trousers are too long.”

Harry had another reason for delaying. He needed time to think about what to teach his brother. Sirius Black had been in Azkaban since he was twenty-two, a few years out of Hogwarts. It was anyone’s guess what he learned before or after Hogwarts, or what he remembered after being surrounded by dementors for over a decade.

He also wanted to cheer his brother up.

They’d gone to Gringotts so he and Monty could exchange their gold for pounds, and Harry had enchanted his brother’s rucksack with undetectable extension and featherlight charms. He was much better at the former than he had been in third year. Harry was tempted to transfigure some leaves into money, but was wary of doing anything too illegal around his brother lest Monty pick up the worst of his habits. Monty had plenty of money. He didn’t need to commit larceny or petty acts of burglary.

When they walked into the first department store, Monty looked just as overwhelmed as Harry had been.

“Why doesn’t anyone notice Madeleine?” Monty asked as they shopped. A few employees had eyed them, Harry in particular, and drifted by to ask if they needed help finding anything.

“Muggle-repelling charm,” Harry said, debating whether to get black trousers, or black trousers. It was a tough decision. “If I didn’t have Frankie disillusioned, it’s what I would use on her. It makes it so muggles don’t notice whatever’s been charmed. The Knight Bus is saturated with spells like that.”

Monty pushed some shirts around on a rack. “Do you think that would work on my school things?”

“So the Dursleys don’t take them?” Harry asked. “Definitely. That car Mr. Weasley has could benefit from a few, if you and your mate plan on taking it for a joyride.”

“Not one of Ron’s best ideas,” Monty said, grinning at him. “He doesn’t even have a license.”

After they'd escaped the department store, Harry took Monty to St. Mungo's.

"Why are we here?" Monty asked.

"To get your eyes checked," Harry said. "And I bet you don't have any inoculations for magical diseases."

St. Mungo's was as interesting as ever. A woman with a whale head, a kid who was slowly turning into a cactus, someone with spattergroit rushed into urgent care, the purple pustules on their skin bursting as healers tried to stabilize them.

"Magical diseases?" Monty asked.

Harry told his brother about spattergroit, dragon pox, vanishing sickness, and other uniquely magical illnesses, while they waited for a free healer. St. Mungo's made for fascinating people watching, and Harry and Monty speculated on what was wrong with everyone. Soon enough, a harried healer carted Monty off. Barely half an hour later Monty was back, looking a bit ill but otherwise fine.

"The floor looks much closer now," Monty commented. He lifted his glasses up, squinted, shrugged, then put them back down.

"Want to get something to eat?" Harry asked as they left St. Mungo's. "We could also see a film, I think there's a theater around here."

"Dudley went to see Jurassic Park last week," Monty said, kicking a crumbled fast food wrapper into the street.

"Then let's see Jurassic Park," Harry said, smiling at him. "That's the one with dinosaurs, right?"

Monty didn't know how he went from talking about defending himself against a deranged mass-murdering godfather to falling off a skateboard, but there he was.

"It's part of the process," Harry told him, doing some kind of flip thing that looked effortless. "It's a lot harder than flying, I think."

"Yeah," Monty agreed. The moment he touched a broom he knew what to do with it. The skateboard defied him.

"I've been at it for years," Harry said. "If it's worth learning, it's worth practicing."

Monty tried to read something deeper in what Harry said, but the skateboard slipped out from under him again and Harry chased after it.

Harry ate a chip while watching his brother attempt to cast a *protego*.

“Magic is about intent,” he said, picking up another chip. “Your wand and your words shape that intent.

Monty nodded and tried again.

There were so many things Harry wanted to do for his brother, things the Dursleys wouldn’t let him have. Films, books, music, video games. Monty hadn’t even had fish and chips before. It was madness.

Monty had taken him to the zoo where he’d accidentally set a boa constrictor loose. The boa had since been recaptured, and Monty introduced them. Then they got knickerbocker glories since Monty had only had his cousin’s leftovers. Monty had even remembered he was allergic to peanuts and had the staff keep them off.

One day wasn’t enough, but it had the intended effect. Monty was still eager to arm himself against Sirius Black, but Harry didn’t think he’d be running off into the night with only his wand and two years of shitty defense instruction.

Harry felt the pinprick of tiny claws on his leg, and looked down to see Lady Madeleine staring up at him with her big, green eyes. Then she began climbing his trousers.

“Maybe it would help if I had something to shield against,” Monty said, breathing heavily.

“Maybe,” Harry said, a little distracted as he fed bits of fish to his kitten. He got his wand out and conjured some Christmas baubles. He picked one up and threw it at his brother. Monty yelped and ducked. It shattered against a wall.

“What was that for?” Monty demanded.

“You said you wanted to test it against something,” Harry said, picking up another bauble.

“We can start with this, then move up to spells. It’s easier to block against physical objects than spells. And there are plenty of spells a shield charm can’t block. Ones a wizard like Sirius Black might use.”

He threw another bauble, and this time Monty managed to get his wand up, but still jumped to the side.

“It’s not a bludger,” Harry said, throwing another one. “You can’t keep dodging forever. I could conjure a hundred of these and surround you with them. What if they were arrows instead? Or knives?”

“Where did you learn this stuff?” Monty asked, panting.

“In Slytherin,” Harry said. “Since our defense classes are shite, the prefects teach us in the common room.” He paused, then added, “I guess that’s my job this year.”

“Percy tried doing that,” Monty said, holding up a hand. Harry slowly lowered the bauble he was about to throw. “Fred and George made fun of him, but some people were interested.”

“I don’t think he’s going to have time for that anymore,” Harry said. “Maybe one of the other Gryffindor prefects could help? I’m not sure who they are. But, I think the Defense professor is going to be a good one this year.”

“You know who it is?” Monty asked.

“I do,” Harry said. “Though it’s probably not something I’m supposed to know, so don’t go spreading it around.”

“Alright,” Monty said. “So who is it?”

Harry sighed, belatedly realizing it might upset his brother. “Remus Lupin.”

Monty stared at him. “He was mates with my dad.”

“He was.”

Monty sat down on his bed, looking lost. “Hagrid sent off owls to get pictures from my parents’ old friends. Why haven’t...” Monty clenched his fists. “Why don’t I know any of them? Why did I have to live with...”

Harry rubbed his face. This was getting close to things he definitely shouldn’t know, things his dad had told him. The blood bond, Lupin’s lycanthropy. “I don’t know, Monty. Maybe you can talk to Hagrid and get some names.”

Monty nodded, though Harry could tell he was still troubled.

“Did you want to keep practicing, or do you want to call it a night?” he asked.

Monty shook his head, standing again. “No, let’s keep practicing.”

Monty couldn’t believe a week had already passed since he had left the Dursleys. He hadn’t even seen half of what Diagon Alley had to offer. He was busy working on learning new spells, and mastering old ones, with Harry’s help. Harry, who was in Monty’s room again, going over his summer assignments with a quill and red ink.

“*Expelliarmus!*”

The quill didn’t move, and Harry circled something on the page.

“I don’t understand why it isn’t working,” Monty said, looking at his wand.

“I know you’re trying to cast it, so I’ve just got to hold onto my quill,” Harry said. “Or use a sticking charm, though that risks losing your hand along with the wand. Disarming is a useful trick, if someone’s got a weak grip or is taken by surprise. Other times it’s a battle of wills. I want to correct your grammar, more than you want to get the quill away from me.”

Monty gave his essay a doleful look. “So if disarming them doesn’t work, what next?”

“There’s other ways to get someone’s wand from them,” Harry said. “You could attack their hand specifically, though it’s a small target. Or you could sneak up on them and grab it. You’ve also got to be able to defend against getting disarmed yourself. *Expelliarmus!*”

Monty’s wand flew out of his hand and Harry caught it neatly out of the air. He gaped at Harry.

“Did you just disarm me with a *quill*?”

Harry grinned at him, then tossed his wand back.

“You don’t need a wand to do magic,” Harry said, turning back to the essay. “Most adult witches and wizards know some wandless magic, and wordless magic. It’s not as powerful as with a wand, though.”

“Why’s that?” Monty asked, narrowing his eyes at the suspicious quill.

“The wand core channels your magic, the wood amplifies it,” Harry said, scribbling something. “And it’s a stick, so it helps with aim. You saw what happened when Professor Snape used the Disarming Charm on Lockhart. He didn’t just drop his wand, he got blasted across the room.”

Harry wrote one last thing then set Monty’s essay down. “It’s a useful spell, but it can be resisted, blocked, deflected, and they could be able to do magic without their wand. And you’ve got to be worried about getting disarmed yourself, or losing your wand in some other manner. How would you get it back? If you disarm someone and they decide to physically attack you, what are you going to do?”

Harry stood up, and there was a little *meow* from his pocket. “Let’s take a break. Do you want to go to the arcade?”

“Which one?” Monty asked, following Harry out of the room.

“Worried about losing at Street Fighter again?” Harry asked, smirking.

Monty scoffed. He just needed more practice.

“The one in Diagon Alley,” Harry said.

Though the Leaky Cauldron was busy, outside the crowds had thinned as the sun had begun to set. The sky was streaked with oranges and purples, casting everything in a reddish glow.

Diagon Alley seemed somehow more magical at dusk, and at night, without the sun to expose it to the world.

“It’s gloaming,” Harry said, smiling up at the sky. He seemed perfectly at ease going around Diagon Alley at night. Monty didn’t know if it was genuine, or if Harry was putting on a show of confidence.

Most of the shops were packing up early. Monty had been hearing whispers about Sirius Black all week. Theories on how he had escaped from Azkaban, people worried about letting their children out, criticizing the Ministry’s lack of success in recapturing him.

Monty surveyed what was still out as they walked. He had offered to repay Harry for their stay at the Leaky Cauldron, at least Monty’s own share, but Harry had turned him down. Monty suspected it had something to do with his summer job, as Harry had set up an entire potions lab in his own room. He wondered if Harry had to rent a room because he didn’t have anywhere else to live.

They stopped under the flashing rainbow marquee of the Antumbra Arcade. A cloud of green smoke issued from one of the windows. Inside, bells were ringing, people were laughing and shouting. There was a loud *splash*, followed by more laughter. Monty wasn’t sure if they were in Diagon Alley proper anymore, as the street looked unfamiliar.

“It’s not just quidditch, you know,” Harry said. “I bet you know dozens of muggle games, and only a few magical ones.”

Monty opened his mouth to object, but after a moment’s thought realized it was true. “What else is there?”

As it turned out, quite a lot.

Monty was immediately dazzled upon entering Antumbra Arcade. There were people everywhere, clustered around flashing boxes that sparked and smoked, kids running around, waitstaff carrying trays of sparkling and glowing drinks, ice cold bottles of butterbeer being uncorked. There was an entire wall of coin-operated dispensers with all sorts of small toys, stickers, sweets such as Toffee Tadpoles, Bertie Bott’s Every-Flavor Beans, a dozen flavors of Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum, Fizzy Whizzies, squeaking Sugar Mice, Exploding Bonbons. There was another *splash* followed by laughter, and Monty saw a row of dunk tanks staffed by familiar and surly dwarfs.

“They’ve got crup fights in the basement,” Harry said. “And amateur dueling. No one underage is allowed down there, though. What do you want to try first?”

Monty spotted the dwarf who had tackled him, sitting in a cage above a tub of water. It was his chance for revenge, and Monty gladly handed over a few sickles to throw balls at the target. The dwarf, who he learned was named Clyde, was resigned as he fell into the water.

“How did you know about this place?” Monty asked as they played a game of gnome toss. Monty had some practice from the Burrow, and was able to land the garden gnomes in the rings most of the time.

“Me and my mates came here for my birthday,” Harry said, squishing a garden gnome’s cheeks so the gnome would stop biting.

“When was that?” Monty asked.

“It’s July twenty-second,” Harry said, chucking the garden gnome at a ring. It landed dead center, grumbled, then trooped back to the line of gnomes waiting to be thrown. “They’ve got jarvey legging over there, seems a bit odd with so many garden gnomes around. I guess they call it jarvey robing?”

Monty turned to see two middle aged witches on a small stage, with pained looks on their faces as animals that resembled ferrets were stuck in their robes.

“They’ve got Catch-a-Moke too,” Harry said, smiling at him. “That one’s really hard, since the mokes keep shrinking. Want to try?”

Harry managed to pull his brother out of the arcade after several hours, reassuring him they could go back. The late hour made him nervous, and he blamed himself for getting caught up in having fun with Monty. His brother’s safety was more important. The arcade was only open after sunset, though, so there was no other time they could have gone.

He set a decent pace back for the Leaky Cauldron, keeping his eye on Monty, who was distracted by the practice snitch he had won.

Something clattered in an alley, and Harry immediately had his wand out, pushing Monty behind him.

“What is it?” Monty whispered.

“Get your wand and stay behind me,” Harry said. “If anything happens to me, run straight back to the Leaky.”

“I’m not going to abandon you,” Monty said firmly. “I can fight too!”

Harry shushed him, narrowing his eyes as something shifted in the dark. Lady Madeleine meowed in his pocket, then stuck her head out.

“What is it, Lady?” Harry whispered. She meowed again, then crawled back into his pocket.

There was a snuffling noise, then a large and rangy black dog stepped out of the alley.

Monty sighed in relief. “It’s just a stray dog.”

“Is it?” Harry said, watching as the dog slowly approached them. “Animals aren’t ever just animals. And this one looks uncannily like a grim. It’s massive.”

The dog *woofed*, then took another step forward.

Harry frowned, trying to understand. Even with Frankie, he could only get a sense of what an animal was trying to communicate. “You’re not a grim?”

“Maybe he’s hungry,” Monty suggested.

The dog whined, lowering his belly.

Harry’s heart melted. He had a weakness for strays. “Fine, we can get him something to eat. But if you try anything,” he said, pointing his wand at the dog, “I’ll neuter you.”

The dog’s ears flattened and he whined again.

Harry started down the street, making sure he was between Monty and the stray dog. Lady Madeleine poked her head out again, and seemed perfectly happy with a dog fifty times her size sniffing her. Harry took it as a good sign, and felt a little less wary towards the dog. So far it hadn’t attacked either of them, and seemed content to walk alongside them.

“I’m not sure if any restaurants in Diagon are still open,” Harry said, frowning at the shuttered businesses. He considered and discarded looking for a place to eat in Knockturn. Not with Sirius Black on the run. Who knew what allies he had. “Leaky Cauldron it is.”

Tom was a gracious host. He didn’t so much as bat an eye when Harry returned with an additional animal. He did chastise them for staying out too late, muttering something about careless muggle parents as he went to get them food. The evening crowd had died down, and the dining room was mostly empty.

“I’m not sure they’d allow a dog at Hogwarts,” Harry said, watching the dog tear pieces of meat from a roast lamb leg. Lady Madeleine was next to him, making a mess of her own food.

“Hagrid has Fang,” Monty pointed out.

“Hagrid lives on the grounds,” Harry said. “Fang has plenty of room to run around. You can’t shut a dog up in a dormitory. Also, what would the Dursleys say?”

Monty looked angry for a moment, then sighed. “You’re right. Aunt Petunia would never allow it. She hates animals.”

“And he could have someone missing him,” Harry said, reaching over to pat the dog’s back. “What if there’s a little girl crying somewhere over her lost dog? Are you going to be a dognapper?”

Monty rolled his eyes. “Then what are we going to do with him?”

“I imagine he’ll run off to wherever he was before, now that he’s been fed,” Harry said. “Animals aren’t helpless, you know.”

Lady Madeleine meowed to be picked up, food smeared all over her face and paws.

“Well, most of them aren’t,” Harry amended.

Once the dog was finished eating, he pressed his nose against Monty then walked into the courtyard. Harry sighed, then followed him. The dog scratched at the wall and gave Harry a baleful look.

“You’re worse than a cat,” Harry said, tapping the brick. “If you’re in, you want out. If you’re out, you want in.”

The dog huffed at him, then trotted off, slipping down an alley and vanishing into the night.

Monty stood in the door of Harry’s room, gaping at what had changed since he had last seen it. There were at least two dozen cauldrons with conjured fires beneath them. The windows had been thrown open, and a stiff breeze was passing through the room. The bed was missing, and Monty had no idea what had been done with it.

“What—”

A bubble appeared around his head.

“Shut the door, would you?” Harry asked, putting his wand away and turning back to the row of cauldrons he was tending to. Lady Madeleine floated past in her own bubble, tumbling around.

“What are you making?” Monty asked, quickly shutting the door.

“Calming Draught, Euphoria Elixir, Confidence Concoction,” Harry listed off, breaking apart springs of mint and dropping leaves into several cauldrons. “For some reason, the hospital wing wants a lot of mood-altering potions this year.”

“Can I help?” Monty asked.

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment, then pulled out a vial filled with placid green potion from his pocket. “When the Calming Draughts turn this color,” he said, passing the vial to Monty, “take the cauldrons off the heat. That means you have to move them completely *off* the fire, okay?”

Monty nodded, walking over to the cauldrons Harry pointed out. “I’ve never heard of these potions before.”

“You’ll learn them in N.E.W.T. classes,” Harry said, pulling on a pair of dragonhide gloves. “There are pretty disastrous consequences if you brew them incorrectly. A poorly brewed Calming Draught is virtually indistinguishable from a properly brewed one. You have to get an O in your Potions O.W.L., though, if you want to learn them in school. If you’d like, we can work on the potions you’ve already covered in class. Potions are dead useful.”

“I’d like that,” Monty said, holding the vial up for comparison. The color in the cauldrons was too dark. “Why do we have bubbles over our heads?”

“Because I’m working with quicksilver,” Harry said. “Mercury. Like they’ve got in thermometers?”

Monty glanced over to Harry, and saw him mixing something at the table. There was an odd grooved board next to him, and a paddle with matching grooves

“What are you making?” Monty asked.

“Just some pills,” Harry said, shaping something with his hands then putting it on the smooth part of the board. It looked like a blue ball of dough. Harry took the paddle and began rolling it out. “Pills are easier to digest for some people. Mind the cauldrons.”

Monty whipped his head around to the cauldrons, relieved to see the potions inside were still too dark a green. “How did you end up doing this?”

“Helping brew potions over the summer?” Harry asked. “It’s kind of embarrassing.” Harry walked over to check on the potions, pulling his gloves off. “Professor Snape caught me stealing. It was the summer after my first year, and I’d already run out of money.”

“So he’s making you work for him?” Monty asked. He couldn’t even conceive of what would happen if Snape caught him stealing. It was too terrible to contemplate.

“It’s more like I get to do magic over the summer, and I don’t have to pick pockets to afford to eat,” Harry said, smiling slightly. “It’s not as dire as it sounds. I know most people don’t get on with Professor Snape—”

Monty snorted. That was an understatement.

“—but he’s a decent bloke.”

Monty didn’t get it, but he wasn’t a Slytherin. Snape always favored Slytherins, though in Harry’s case it seemed justified. Monty would have loved it if McGonagall showed up and saved him from the Dursleys last summer. Though, that auror had come to help. And Harry had.

Monty had people looking out for him. He was glad Harry did too.

Fools and Gold

Chapter Summary

August 1993

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You are not buying me a solid gold gobstones set,” Harry said.

“But—”

“Honestly, you don’t have to worry about paying anything back, it’s all covered,” he said, still looking at the gold gobstones. They really were nice, but completely ill-suited to league play. Charity would have his head if he tried to play with those. Not to mention the cost. Harry doubted they were even playable; gold was far too soft for gobstones, they’d have to be spelled impervious, which would also rule them illegal.

Harry smiled apologetically at his brother, sad he had to dash Monty’s hopes. “It was a nice thought.”

There was a crowd forming in front of Quality Quidditch Supplies, and Harry pointed it out to his brother.

“I think they’ve just released the Firebolt,” Harry said.

Monty turned to look, and his eyes lit up. “I think that’s Dean and Seamus. Is it okay for me to talk to them?”

“I don’t see why not,” Harry said. There had been more and more Hogwarts students showing up as the start of term neared. Someone would eventually notice Monty. “Just try to be discreet, and don’t mention me.”

“Got it,” Monty said.

“I’ve got to owl some things,” Harry said. “Keep your wits about you, and your wand at the ready.”

Monty nodded, then went over to greet his friends. Harry watched for a moment, a little concerned to be leaving Monty on his own. Someone could grab him and apparate away before anyone reacted. But he didn’t want to smother Monty, or expose how paranoid he actually was. A large dog would have been useful to have around, but they hadn’t seen the one they had met again. That boa constrictor at the zoo was friendly enough, if non-magical.

There were other snakes, though. Magical snakes. But then Monty would be outed as a parselmouth.

Harry needed to learn more about personal protection. Something to stop Monty from being snatched off the street. Something with runes, maybe. Surely other people had worried about their children being kidnapped. Had spells already been developed?

He quickly walked to the Owl Post Office, worried about his brother. A crowd wouldn't protect Monty. Sirius Black had already proven body count didn't matter to him.

Severus looked up from his coffee when an owl pecked on the kitchen window. He lazily waved his hand and the window sprang open, admitting a drab owl wearing a sash identifying it as from the Owl Post Office. It dropped a small pouch onto his kitchen table, then stared at Severus until he gave the owl a few knuts as a tip. The owl stole a piece of bacon then flew off.

Shaking his head, Severus cast a few detection spells at the pouch, then opened it up. It was packed with flasks and vials of potions, a roll of parchment that had all of Harry's arithmantic calculations verifying the potency, which at a glance checked out, and a bottle charmed impervious with twelve blue pills. Harry had even filled several vials with samples for him to test.

Harry was turning out to be as good at charms as his mother, as well as a competent potioneer.

Severus looked at the empty chair across from him. He didn't like the two boys staying in Diagon Alley by themselves for a month, though he was confident Harry would be fine. If Potter refused to return to his relatives, and unless they used force, there wasn't much of a choice.

If Harry wasn't able to come home, too busy guarding his brother, then perhaps Severus could visit him.

Severus took another sip of coffee, thinking.

He picked up Harry's calculations and the potion samples and carried them down into the lab to run a few tests. He emerged some time later, satisfied with the results. Checking the time, Severus scowled, gathered the potions, then flooed directly to the infirmary at Hogwarts.

"Oh, Severus, I wasn't expecting you so soon," Madam Pomfrey said, hurrying over. "You've already finished?"

"I have," he said, passing the various potions to her and entirely omitting Harry's contribution. He knew Pomfrey wouldn't mind, but the information would inevitably get

back to Dumbledore.

“I don’t know why the headmaster ordered all of this,” she said, sorting the flasks and vials into one of her potions cabinets.

“I expect we’ll learn at the meeting in—” Severus checked his watch “—five minutes.”

“Best hurry, then,” Madam Pomfrey said, locking the cabinet and rushing out of the hospital wing. Severus followed after her, crossing his arms. He had also wondered why the headmaster wanted a surplus of Calming Draughts and Euphoria Elixir, and he didn’t like the conclusion he had come to.

Inside the staffroom, Severus was unsurprised to see the entire faculty. Including one Remus Lupin. Lupin gave him a tentative smile. Severus ignored him.

The only seat remaining was between Lupin and Charity Burbage, and Severus was briefly tempted to ask Burbage if she would switch seats. He wondered if the headmaster was behind the seating arrangements.

“Ah, Severus, have a seat,” Dumbledore said as he was in the midst of having said seat.

“Welcome, everyone, it’s lovely to see you all. We have a fortnight until term begins and some matters to discuss. First and foremost, the Ministry has informed me that dementors will be stationed at the school.”

“What?” Burbage exclaimed, standing up. “That’s outrageous!”

Severus stared at the headmaster. For him to agree to dementors, there was some reason to suspect Sirius Black was after Potter. Why else would he come to Hogwarts?

There were other murmurs of discontent. Lupin sagged in his seat, a pensive look on his face. Was he worried about the dementors, or Sirius Black? Or what the dementors would do to Sirius Black when they found him?

Dementors. Around his son. It *was* outrageous, but he shouldn't say anything. Severus Snape would care more about Sirius Black getting Kissed by a dementor than the effect dementors would have on the students.

“What is the point in having dementors around the school?” he found himself asking. “They failed to keep Black in Azkaban. What is the logic in assigning them a task they’ve proven ineffectual at?”

“Exactly,” Burbage said, pounding the table. “Severus is *exactly* right. How thick can the Ministry get?”

“They will only be stationed at the gates, Charity,” Dumbledore said consolingly.

“That’s how it starts, isn’t it?” she said, eyes flashing. “You think the dementors will be happy with that? How are they going to feed?”

This started a new round of argument. Severus glanced at Lupin.

“Nothing to contribute?” he asked.

Lupin smiled in a self-deprecating way. “Dementors cannot be reasoned with, only placated. We’re lucky they’re agreeing to stay in one place.”

Severus sat back, disgusted by the whole affair. Madam Pomfrey was shouting about the welfare of the students, while Flitwick tried to talk her down. Eventually, Dumbledore called them back to order. The dementors were not up for debate. It was simply the way things were going to be that year.

“What a nightmare,” Burbage said emphatically, sitting back down. “A literal nightmare, that’s what those bloody things are.”

“Remus has agreed to accompany the students on the train,” Dumbledore said, smiling at Lupin.

Severus stared blankly at the table. Dementors. Around his son.

The meeting dragged on, and finally Dumbledore dismissed them. Madam Pomfrey left ranting about placing an order with Honeydukes.

“Severus, Remus,” Dumbledore said, “if you would join me in my office.”

Burbage clapped his shoulder and muttered, “Untuck it,” before flouncing away.

Baffled by her behavior, Severus followed the headmaster to his office, noting with irritation that Lupin was walking next to him.

“It’s been a while,” Lupin said, glancing at him.

“Shame it wasn’t longer,” Severus said.

Lupin chuckled. “Thank you for what you’re doing. I do appreciate it. When the headmaster told me—”

“Don’t mention it,” Severus said. “Ever.”

“Very well,” Lupin said easily.

“Burying the hatchet,” Dumbledore said happily as they reached the gargoyle. “How wonderful!”

“I’d rather bury it in his back,” Severus muttered. To his dismay, this made Lupin laugh again.

When they reached the office Severus took his normal position near a window, just in case he needed to throw himself out of it.

“Now,” Dumbledore said, sighing as he sat behind his desk. “I have a little project for you two this year.”

Severus frowned. The last *little project* he had worked on was playing the headmaster's alchemy gofer. His frown deepened as the headmaster placed Tom Riddle's diary on his desk.

"What is that?" Lupin asked, concerned.

"This is a key," Dumbledore said, eyes sparkling, patting the diary. "The key to breaking the curse on the Defense post!"

Harry woke up in the middle of the night to a knock on his door. He got up quickly, dislodging Lady Madeleine, worried something had happened to Monty. Grabbing his wand, he hurried to the door and threw it open.

"I see you are prepared," his dad said, sweeping into the room. Candles burst to life.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked, shutting the door. "*Smyltnes*."

His dad turned around to face him. "You're rather proficient with silencing charms."

"Not everyone is fond of hurdy-gurdies," Harry said, going back to his bed to sit down.

His dad raised an eyebrow, but didn't question his explanation. "There has been an unfortunate turn of events. Dementors will be stationed at Hogwarts this year."

Harry stopped rubbing his eyes. "I'm sorry, did you say dementors? At a school? Filled with children?"

"You are not the only one to make this astute observation," his dad said, frowning at the stack of cauldrons. Harry hoped he didn't find anything to criticize about it. "It would be prudent for you to learn the Patronus Charm, and to accelerate your occlumency."

"Monty—"

"You may share with him anything you learn," his dad said, turning around to face him. "The Patronus Charm is the manifestation of positivity. This is sometimes erroneously framed as the concentration of one's happiest memory. This is a crutch. What is required is the *capacity* for what are colloquially known as positive emotions. *Happiness* is often a consequence of such emotions, hence its association with the Patronus."

"So I think of a happy memory," Harry said, "or something that could make me happy?"

"Initially," his dad said, pulling out his wand. "Observe." He moved his wand in a spiral, incanting, "*Expecto patronum*."

Harry watched in awe as a silvery-blue doe leapt out of his dad's wand. The doe walked towards him, and Harry reached out a hand. Lady Madeleine meowed sleepily.

"You did that immediately," Harry said, looking away from the doe. "You didn't think at all."

"Indeed," his dad said. The doe faded away. "I don't often conjure a corporeal patronus. It reveals something about the caster. Most dark witches and wizards don't even attempt casting it."

Harry frowned, wondering what the doe meant but knowing better than to ask. A patronus was very personal. What would his look like? What it would say about him?

"Think of something that makes you happy," his dad said. "Once you have concentrated on it, attempt the spell."

Harry nodded and stood. He thought back to the first time he had seen his brother. It hadn't exactly been a happy day. Seeing how Monty was treated by his uncle. Hearing what the Dursleys had done to him. But Monty had been happy, and that made Harry happy.

He took a breath, copied his dad's wand movement, and said, "*Expecto patronum.*"

To his surprise, a silvery wall of mist formed in front of him.

"That is a good start," his dad said. "Consider how you might alter the wand movement to amplify the patronus. Continue practicing. I will return tomorrow night to test your occlumency."

"Alright," Harry said, dropping his arm. "Thank you."

"The least I can do is teach you how to defend yourself," his dad said, walking to the door. "Have a good evening."

"Night, dad," Harry said, watching his dad leave. He looked down at Lady Madeleine, who had fallen asleep again.

Alter the wand movement.

Harry held out his wand, moving it in a spiral several times. "*Expecto patronum.*"

The shield was bigger that time. Harry grinned, then tried again.

Egypt was interesting.

They had been up and down the Nile, visiting all of the tombs, observing curses placed by the priests of ancient Egypt, complex mechanisms that followed the sun in its path across the sky,

guiding the dead into the afterlife.

Bill's work was also interesting. Their siblings were fascinated by tales of taming cerberi and immolating two-headed glowing skeletons, fighting his way out of tombs, battling hordes of animated corpses. Percy was more interested in how the goblins had the authority to explore the tombs and seize the assets within. It seemed to Percy that such things belonged to the Egyptian government, either magical or muggle. Did the goblins not recognize human governments at all? He had tried to talk to Bill about it, but Bill didn't share his interest. Nor did their father. When Percy suggested they tour the Egyptian Ministry, his father had only said they were on holiday, not a business trip.

Percy had tentatively been looking forward to his seventeenth birthday. He would be able to do magic when and where he wanted, within the law of course, and when they returned to Britain he could take the apparition exam.

"Happy birthday, dear," his mother said that morning, kissing him on the cheek. "Bill and Charlie went out to pick up some breakfast for us. Muggle food," she added, smiling at him. "You've been a bit out of sorts lately."

Percy looked around the table. There was food, a fava bean stew ringed by slices of lemon and boiled egg. Flat bread, falafel and tzatziki, slices of cucumber and tomato, pots of tea. His family sat all around him, chivvied out of bed. Ron was yawning.

"Thank you," Percy said.

"Happy birthday, Percival," Fred and George chorused, passing him a plastic bag. Percy cautiously opened it, and was surprised to see it was filled with muggle crisps and sweets. At least that's what Percy thought it was, based on the packaging.

"Thank you," he said, giving his brothers a nod. "I look forward to sampling these items."

Fred and George grinned at him.

"This is from me and Ron," Ginny said, passing him a wrapped box. Percy carefully unwrapped it, and found it was an owl care kit.

"This is very thoughtful," Percy said, smiling at her and Ron, who yawned again.

"And this is from me and Charlie," Bill said, handing Percy another box. Inside was a set of royal purple dress robes. Percy gave his older brothers a startled look at the largess.

"You'll need them for official events," Charlie said, smiling warmly.

Percy cleared his throat. "Thank you."

"This is from your father and I," his mother said, passing him a small box. Inside was a gold pocket watch.

Percy pushed his glasses up as he examined the watch. He'd never seen one like it before. Except for the gold rim, inscribed with runes he could barely make out, the clock was entirely

transparent, strange symbols moving around the edge, traced by free floating dials.

“If you press the top, it’ll show you the time where you are currently,” his father said, and Percy did so, watching as the clockwork came to a stop.

“This is remarkable,” he said. “Thank you.”

“And since it’s Percy’s birthday,” his mother said. “Today we will be visiting the Egyptian Ministry of Magic!”

Not everyone seemed enthused by this. Given the twins had tried to trap him in a tomb on Ginny’s birthday, Percy didn’t care.

That evening, after witnessing a fascinating interrogation of a sphinx who had been stalking tourists, and a chance meeting with the Egyptian Minister while she was eating lunch, Percy found himself confronted with a lemon and berry shortcake baked by his mother. He somberly accepted a slice. It looked delicious. His mother’s food always did.

An owl soared into Bill’s kitchen, landing in front of Percy. It was from the Owl Post Office, and had a small package tied to its leg.

Percy pushed the cake aside and untied the package.

“Must’ve come all the way from England,” Charlie said, pulling a few sickles out to give to the owl.

“Who’d be sending Percy anything?” Ron asked between bites of shortcake.

“His girlfriend, you moron,” Ginny said.

“Well, go on, open it!” his mother said, beaming at him.

Percy didn’t see he had much of a choice. There was a note attached to the box, which he carefully pulled off and unfolded.

Dear Percy,

Congratulations on your Head Boyhood, and on making it to seventeen. This is for all those important documents you’ll be signing. I look forward to working with you.

PS Give it a twist. I think you’ll find the results rather lurid. Squeezing also has an interesting effect.

It was unsigned, but Percy knew who it was from.

Blushing, he stuck the note into his pocket, which everyone noticed. He'd have to hide it in one of his school books. The most boring one. He opened the package, which was wrapped in parchment, and found a small black leather case embossed with his initials.

"Oh, very smart," his mother said warmly. "What's inside?"

Percy studiously avoided looking at the twins and opened the case. Inside was a golden fountain pen, and a bottle of color-changing ink.

"A muggle pen?" his father said. "Fascinating!"

"Is it?" Ron said doubtfully.

Percy ignored them, flattening the parchment wrapping and writing a few letters on it. The ink came out black. Percy carefully twisted the barrel and wrote a few more letters, this time in red ink. Curious, he tried squeezing the pen, and watched in amazement as the ink was sucked back up.

"That's useful," Bill said, smiling at him. "From your girlfriend?"

"Penelope Clearwater," his mother said proudly. "A Ravenclaw prefect!"

"She's Head Girl this year," Percy said absently, still looking at the pen. He wanted to keep writing with it. It was a seamless blend of muggle technology and magic. It was incredibly thoughtful.

Harry was a prefect. Percy would have to do something to congratulate him. As Head Boy. It was only common courtesy.

Lady Madeleine yawned. Harry yawned, then smiled as Monty yawned as well.

"I hate when that happens," Monty grumbled, tearing apart his croissant. The Leaky Cauldron didn't have the best coffee. Harry needed coffee, so he had taken Monty to a cafe for breakfast.

"Blame Her Ladyship," Harry said, scratching Lady Madeleine's ears. Harry had told Monty about the dementors the morning after his dad had told him. He was worried what effect the dementors would have on his brother. He didn't know how early people began forming memories, but he had a vivid memory of his mum crying. It was the oldest memory Harry had. He had asked his gran about it, but she didn't remember. It felt real to Harry, though. He was certain it had happened.

Monty had been there the night Voldemort had killed her. He had only been fifteen months old at the time. Had he seen their mum die? Did he remember?

After a week of practicing, Harry had a decent incorporeal patronus, but it was nowhere near what his dad had been able to produce. Focusing on *happiness* seemed to be stymieing him. Monty was able to make a sort of silvery gas. He was struggling with finding a happy enough memory. It was disheartening. Mind clearing exercises were also going poorly for Monty. Dementors and mass murderers weren't conducive to happiness or calm.

"Looks like you've got an owl," Monty said, pointing to the sky.

Harry looked up. It was Hermes, carrying a package

Monty knew Percy. Monty would likely know Hermes.

Harry hastily cleared space on the table for Hermes to land. He fluttered his wings, slowly lowering the package.

"Thank you," Harry said, untying the package. He looked around the table for something to give Hermes, then spotted the pieces of chicken left over in Lady Madeleine's bowl. He held it up for Hermes, who gave him a loaded look before flying off.

"Fussy eater," Harry said, picking up the letter that had come with the package.

"Who's it from?" Monty asked, examining the package.

Harry wasn't sure what to say. Had Monty not recognized the owl? "A fellow prefect," he settled on, opening the letter.

Dear Prefect Evans,

Congratulations on your appointment. I cannot think of a worthier person to assume the role of prefect. I am confident you will bring honor to the position.

Thank you for the pen. My father is curious where it was acquired, or alternatively who created it. I have used it to sign my apparition license.

I recall you have a fondness for muggle music. My father has done extensive research in modifying muggle electronics such that they may function in magically dense areas. He has had limited success, as magic is as a rule incompatible with muggle devices, hence the danger inherent in misusing them. However, his efforts have not gone to waste. I have included an iteration of a project he began when he himself was a student at Hogwarts: a wireless which will work in the castle. This is one of his sophomore attempts, but I assure you it is quite functional.

As you may have inferred, my family has returned from our holiday. If possible, would you be able to meet in Diagon Alley to discuss recent events? It seems this will be another trying year at Hogwarts, and it is our duty as prefects to support the professors during such times.

Warm regards,

Head Boy Weasley

Harry put the letter back into its envelope, and the envelope into a pocket. He carefully unwrapped the package, revealing a small wooden radio.

“A wireless?” Monty said, sitting up so he could see it better.

“It’s supposed to work in Hogwarts,” Harry said. He picked up his coffee and took a sip, hoping he wasn’t blushing.

“Brilliant,” Monty said, sharing a smile with him.

“Yeah,” Harry said, staring at the wireless. “He is.”

“Cedric Diggory?” Monty asked, startling Harry. “He’s a prefect too, right?”

“Right,” Harry said weakly. He hadn’t thought about Cedric for weeks. “Want to go try this out?”

Chapter End Notes

My favorite Christmas carol is that one about [begging](#)

Simple Spells

Chapter Summary

August 31st, 1993

Chapter Notes

The only tags I know about are gift tags

Harry glanced at the door, then read Percy's letter again. ...*Family will be staying at the Leaky Cauldron the day before term begins...If you are amenable, we could meet...*

He hadn't liked having to put Percy off, but having Monty around would have been impossible to explain.

Harry sighed, then picked up his coffee, grimacing at the bitter taste. At least the food at the Leaky Cauldron was good, if a bit repetitive after a month. It was harder to eat in Diagon Alley itself, given how many people were placing owl orders instead of shopping in person. Harry wished he had one of Jasmine's parasols. There had even been an article in the muggle news about the unexplained migratory behavior.

Monty was back to looking more like himself, now that there was only a day left until term. They had their story straight, but Harry went over it again as they waited for Monty's friends to arrive.

"So, the Dursleys dropped you off..."

"Yesterday afternoon," Monty said a little testily. "I got it. You really don't have to worry so much. It's just Ron and Hermione."

In Harry's mind, there was no *just Ron and Hermione*. There were two potential information leaks. Perhaps he was a tad paranoid, but it was hardly unjustified.

"Look, there she is now," Monty said, standing up and hurrying over to the entrance, where Hermione Granger was struggling with a trunk, her parents looking around the pub in awe.

Harry took another sip of his coffee. He missed the way his dad made it.

"Monty! It's so good to see you! How long have you been here?"

Harry was steadily getting better at being less expressive, only briefly closing his eyes at Hermione announcing to the world that Monty Potter was at the Leaky Cauldron. Everyone in the pub turned to look at Monty, though he and Hermione were oblivious to this. Harry surreptitiously watched as Hermione's parents spoke with Tom about getting her a room, then left their thirteen-year-old daughter to her own devices. Harry knew the Weasleys were arriving soon, otherwise he would question their sanity. Had they not seen Sirius Black in the news?

Monty and Hermione disappeared upstairs, but after a few minutes came back down to join Harry at his table.

"Oh, hello," Hermione said, smiling shyly at him. "Are you staying here as well?"

"Yeah, just got in," Harry said.

Before they could say more, the fireplace turned green and Fred and George Weasley emerged. They spotted Monty immediately, then turned to look at Harry, their eyebrows rising in surprise. Behind them, the fire flared again, and the rest of the Weasley family came through.

"Monty!" Ron shouted, dropping his trunk and hurrying over to Monty, trailed by his sister and his parents. The room was filling with Weasleys and luggage

Harry's eyes automatically sought out Percy, and his breath caught. Percy was brushing ash from his robes, Hermes ruffling his feathers in his cage. Then Percy looked up and saw Harry.

"Alright, Evans?" George asked, sticking his face in front of Harry's.

"Fancy meeting you here," Fred said, grinning at him.

"See something you like?" George said.

"A sight for sore eyes?" Fred added.

"I have no idea what you're babbling about," Harry said, taking a sip of his coffee. It was truly awful.

The twins' bantering drew their mother's attention. She had been hugging Monty, but released him to smile at Harry.

"Is that Harry Evans?" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed. "Arthur, come say hello!"

Harry was drawn into the gravity well of Weasleys. Getting hugged by Mrs. Weasley, which was oddly comforting, shaking hands with Mr. Weasley, exchanging awkward greetings with Ginny and Ron.

"The Dursleys dropped me off yesterday," he heard his brother say. "I've already got my school things..."

“Are you staying at the Leaky Cauldron?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

“I am,” Harry said. “Last year my train was late, so I reckoned it was better to be safe than sorry.”

“Monty, how nice to see you,” he heard Percy say. He glanced over and saw Percy shaking a bemused Monty’s hand.

“A muggle train?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“And other forms of muggle transportation,” Harry said.

“Amazing! How does it work?”

Fred and George had pushed Percy aside to effusively greet Monty. Seeing this, Mrs. Weasley seized Percy and put him in front of Harry.

“Nice to see you,” Harry said, taking Percy in. He’d got taller, and was more freckled than Harry remembered. He was wearing his Head Boy badge. Harry hadn’t bothered putting his prefect one on, nor his gobstones captain badge, not wanting to draw attention to him and Monty.

Harry put out his hand. Percy hesitated, but he eventually took it and they shook.

“You look...well,” Percy said. “Congratulations on your prefecthood.”

“Congratulations on your Head Boyship,” Harry said, glancing at the badge. “You certainly earned it.”

“You’re a prefect?” Mrs. Weasley exclaimed. Harry quickly released Percy’s hand, not dwelling on how it had felt in his. “Oh, that makes perfect sense!”

Fred and George made identical gagging faces. “Thank you, Mrs. Weasley. I was actually hoping to speak with Percy about some start-of-term matters.”

“Were you?” George asked, sharing a look with Fred.

“About recent security measures at Hogwarts,” Harry continued, looking at Mr. Weasley, whose eyes widened in understanding.

Percy cleared his throat, the tips of his ears turning red. “I need to purchase my school supplies.”

“Harry can go around with you!” Mrs. Weasley said. “I’m sure he has a few things to pick up, don’t you, dear?”

“I do,” Harry said easily.

“Well, let’s all get settled in first and then we’ll be off,” Mrs. Weasley said, taking her husband’s arm and hurrying him over to Tom.

“So you’re staying the night?” Harry asked Percy.

“We are,” Percy said, straightening his Head Boy badge.

Harry took a step forward, lowering his voice. “I really do have some important things to talk about. I don’t know if your dad’s told you, but—”

An arm wrapped around his shoulders. “What are you two whispering about?” Fred asked.

“How’s Diggory?” George asked, glancing at Percy.

“Gryffindor will not recover from the price I exact for this indignity,” Harry said solemnly.

“Merlin, you sound like Snape,” Fred said, releasing him.

“I’m sure Cedric’s fine,” Harry said. “Aren’t you neighbors?”

“Yeah, but we’ve been gone all summer,” George said.

“Well, I haven’t seen him,” Harry said flatly. “I think his dad’s got him in bubble wrap.”

“What’s that?” Fred asked.

“It’s a packing material that muggles use,” Percy said, pushing up his glasses. Harry was impressed he knew. It wasn’t exactly part of the curriculum.

“Come along, children,” Mr. Weasley called out. “Let’s get this all up to our rooms. Fred and George, here’s your key. Do *not* lose it. Ginny, you’ve got your own room. Ron, you’re with Percy.”

Percy sighed. Harry was tempted to offer his own room. He could stay with Monty. Or maybe Percy would be fine with sharing...

“I’ll be back momentarily,” Percy said. “We can continue our discussion then.”

Harry nodded mutely, watching Percy levitate his trunk and Hermes’ cage, directing both upstairs, passing his struggling siblings without a word.

“You’re a prefect?”

Harry looked over to Hermione and Monty, who had a sheepish grin. Harry hadn’t even noticed them approaching.

“I am,” Harry said, smiling slightly. “Apparently I was the least annoying option.”

Harry watched as Percy stacked Lockhart books on the counter of the Second-Hand Bookshop.

"I should've brought mine to sell," Harry said as the clerk added the books up.

"I'm afraid they aren't worth much," the clerk said. She looked up at Percy. "I can do eight sickles each, since they're signed. Twelve if you want it for store credit."

"I will take the credit," Percy said.

"My mate Cassius says Lockhart's flooded the market," Harry said, watching as the clerk wrote out a slip.

"We've had loads of people selling their Lockhart books this year," the clerk said.

"Makes sense," Harry said. "Everyone in Hogwarts has seen him drop his wand at least once."

The clerk shook her head, passing the slip to Percy. "Let me know if you need help finding anything."

"Thank you," Percy said, turning away from the counter. "Is there anything you're looking for, Evans?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I've already got all my books, Weasley. I'll take a look around, though."

Percy nodded, then proceeded into the stacks. Harry slowly followed him, looking around. It wasn't that different from a muggle used bookshop. The shelves were close together, packed with books. It was dim, and dusty, as if the book themselves exuded it. All the more interactive books, the ones which resisted being read, were kept behind the counter, spelled into obeisance. One thing that stood out to Harry, aside from the colorful titles, was how there weren't any paperback books.

"What are you looking for?" Harry asked, pulling out a copy of *A Compendium of Common Curses and Their Counter-Actions*. He thought Monty would like it.

"Recent editions of *The Law of Conduct when Dealing with Muggles* and *Dark Arts: A Legal Companion*," Percy said, frowning at a shelf that had turned all the books on it around, hiding the spines.

"You might have to go to Flourish and Blotts for that, or Tomes and Scrolls," Harry said, flipping through the *Compendium*. "We could check in Knockturn, too. Do you need them for class?"

"No, they are for my personal collection," Percy said. "I don't need the latest editions, but something from the past decade would be preferable."

Harry glanced at him. "Wouldn't the *Dealing with Muggles* one have your dad's new law in it?"

“I doubt they’ve updated it quite yet,” Percy said. “And it isn’t a certain thing it will be passed. The vote isn’t until next week.”

“It’ll pass,” Harry said, moving closer to Percy. “All the stuff with Sirius Black has come up again. People remember all the muggles he killed. What a nightmare it was for the Ministry to cover up. It was one of the biggest breaches of the Statute of Secrecy in living memory, at least in Britain.”

Percy pulled a book out, then looked down at him. “The Wizengamot vacillates between ignoring public opinion and acceding to it, though I admit rejecting a law designed to protect muggles with Sirius Black on the loose would cast them in a bad light.”

Harry sighed, closing the book he held. “I don’t really want to go to Flourish and Blotts, but I’ve been wanting to show you that display. Somehow, they’ve made it worse.”

After more searching, Percy spent some credit on a few books he found, saving the remainder to give to his mother. They made their way to Flourish and Blotts, where they found Monty, Ron, and Hermione watching the manager take down two cages containing copies of *The Monster Book of Monsters*. The single large cage had been replaced by a wall of individual ones. It was far less entertaining, but prevented the books from damaging each other.

“You’ve got to stroke the spine to read the book,” the manager said, spotting Harry and giving him a nod.

“Is that what you wished for me to see?” Percy asked.

Harry shook his head. He almost reached for Percy to pull him in the right direction. Harry stopped himself, crossing his arms so he wouldn’t be tempted.

“It’s this way,” he said, leading Percy to the display of *Hunting Werewolves*. After the Lycanthropic Laborers Act had been hastily pushed through in the weeks following Sirius Black’s escape from Azkaban, a new publication had joined the display.

Percy picked up one of the books. “*Lupine Lawlessness: Why Lycanthropes Don’t Deserve to Live*,” he read, scowling at the book. “How ghastly.”

“It’s appalling,” Harry said. “I don’t understand where the anti-werewolf sentiment is coming from all of a sudden.”

“It’s Umbridge,” Percy said, setting the book down. “Father says she was a few years ahead of him, in Slytherin.” He glanced at Harry, but Harry only shrugged. “He doesn’t remember much about her from school, but she’s been getting attention in the Ministry for her... extreme views.”

“I guess that’s one way to gain power,” Harry said, barely masking his disgust. “Lighting the first torch, leading the lynch mob.”

“Indeed,” Percy said heavily. “I don’t think there is anything in here I’d care to purchase. Would you like a coffee?”

“I hear there’s a good place across the street,” Harry said, smiling at him.

Monty watched Harry and Percy leave Flourish and Blotts.

“Did you know they were friends?” Ron asked, petting the book he’d just got.

Monty frowned thoughtfully. Percy’s owl had looked oddly familiar. “I had no idea. Where’s Hermione gone off to?”

Ron pointed, and Monty turned to see a mountain of books stacked on the counter, Hermione staring at them in adoration.

“How many classes is she taking?” Monty asked, dumbfounded. The matter of Harry and Percy was completely forgotten.

“Thank you,” Harry said, accepting the drink from Percy. “A latte?”

Percy sat down across from him, a faint blush on his cheeks. “It seemed like something you would like.”

“It is,” Harry said. “So. Recent events.”

“Sirius Black,” Percy said, a wrinkle forming between his brows. “They’ve pulled everyone in the Ministry off their regular jobs. I’m surprised father was able to accompany us today, though I suspect it is because he told them he was meeting with a certain person.”

“Right,” Harry said, glancing at Flourish and Blotts. Monty was leaving with Ron and Hermione, the latter of whom was laden with bulging bags. The trio made their way to Fortescue’s for ice cream. “They’re putting dementors at Hogwarts.”

Percy looked up sharply. “I beg your pardon?”

Harry snorted, then took a sip of his latte. He usually drank coffee black, like his dad, but the shots of espresso the cafe used were strong. The milk tempered it nicely. “That was my reaction. Supposedly they’ll only be at the gates, but I don’t think anyone believes they’ll stay there.”

Percy ran a hand through his hair, mussing his coppery curls. “Ludicrous.”

“I think we should learn the Patronus Charm,” Harry said.

Percy shook his head. “That’s a N.E.W.T. level spell. Not even that. Most *aurors* can’t produce a patronus.”

“Maybe not a corporeal one,” Harry said. “A non-corporeal one would work for our purposes. Even if it isn’t possible for most people, I think it’s worth attempting. I’ve had some success on my own.”

Percy gave him a shrewd look. “I’ll have to do some research on dementors. There may be simpler alternatives.”

“There aren’t,” Harry said, “not really. Chocolate can be used to treat the effects of dementor exposure.”

“We can carry around chocolate, that’s easy enough,” Percy said.

“And there’s occlumency,” Harry said.

Percy sighed. “Another immensely difficult magic.”

Harry took another sip, somewhat enjoying the sight of a frustrated Percy. He was normally so composed. “It’s a shitshow. No one has any idea how Black escaped from the dementors, yet they think dementors can capture him.”

Percy shook his head again, taking a sip of his own drink. “It would be more accurate to say the dementors believe they can capture him, and the Ministry is trying to reign them in. The dementors are angry.”

“That’s even better,” Harry said sourly. “Angry dementors at Hogwarts. What a brilliant idea. Even more reason why we should be learning how to conjure patroni.”

“I wasn’t rejecting your idea,” Percy said, looking at him. “I just don’t think we’ll be successful.”

Harry shrugged. He was determined to get the spell down. He felt on the cusp of understanding it.

There was a *meow* from his hoodie pocket, and Lady Madeleine stuck her head out.

Percy leaned forward. “And who is this?”

“Lady Madeleine,” Harry said, pulling her out. “Your Ladyship, I would like to introduce you to Head Boy Percival Septimus Weasley.”

He placed Lady Madeleine on the table, and she blinked up at Percy. Percy let her sniff his hand, then took one of her little paws and shook it gently.

“It is an honor to meet you, Your Ladyship” he said humbly.

“Meow.”

“I think the feeling is mutual,” Harry said, smiling at Percy. “So, how was Egypt? You mentioned meeting a sphinx?”

“Oh, yes,” Percy said, looking up at him again, the blush returning. “It was fascinating. Her name is Neferneferuaten, and she represented herself in the case. I suppose after living for several millennia you pick up a thing or two about legal procedure...”

Harry had been thoroughly absorbed into the Weasley contingent, along with Monty and Hermione who both looked much more comfortable with the turn of events. He had intended to retreat to his room, wanting to avoid any awkward questions, but instead found himself eating a five course meal in one of the Leaky Cauldron’s parlor rooms. There was a rich chocolate pudding with a pile of vanilla ice cream before him. Percy was only picking at his, moving the food around so it looked like he had eaten.

“How are we getting to King’s Cross tomorrow, dad?” Fred asked from his left. Harry had ended up sitting between him and George, the riskiest seat.

“The Ministry’s providing a couple of cars,” Mr. Weasley said offhandedly.

Percy looked over at him. “Why? We should have just driven up if we needed a car.”

“It’s because of you, Perce,” George said seriously. “And there’ll be little flags on the bonnets, with HB on them—”

“—for Humongous Bighead,” Fred finished.

Harry rolled his eyes. It seemed everyone else found this amusing, except for Mrs. Weasley and Percy himself, who glared at his brothers.

“That wasn’t even clever,” Harry said.

“Think you could do better?” Fred asked, nudging him.

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but the only word that started with *h* he could think of was *handsome*.

“Why are the Ministry providing cars, father?” Percy asked, his voice firmer.

“Well, I’m an employee,” Mr. Weasley said shiftily. “They’re doing it as a favor.

“And a good thing, too,” Mrs. Weasley said. “Can you imagine all that luggage on the muggle Underground? You *are* all packed, aren’t you?”

“Ron’s dumped all his things on my bed,” Percy said, sounding tired. He pushed his pudding around some more.

Harry had the sudden impression that the Weasleys were a nice family, but not particularly nice to Percy. He had thought it was just the twins, and Ron, but even Ginny had laughed at him. Even Mr. Weasley. He knew Percy looked up to his dad. A dad who had laughed at him for being proud of his achievements.

Harry didn't feel very much like pudding anymore.

After dinner, Harry went to his room to finish packing. There wasn't much to do. His dad had taken all of his temporary potions lab equipment away when he'd visited the night before. Fifth year charms introduced the topics of sorting and organizational charms, complex algorithmic spells. If it was packing something that had been unpacked, putting things back where they had been, it was much easier. Harry wanted to know why. Was there a temporal element?

There was a knock on his wall. Surprised, Harry left his room and went to his brother's. Monty had his door open, and Harry peeked in.

"Did you need something?" he asked, looking at the items strewn about his brother's room.

"Is there a spell for packing trunks?" Monty asked.

Harry grinned at him, pleased his brother was using his advice. That was the question Harry always asked himself when he encountered something. Was there a spell for it?

"There are various spells," he said, shutting the door behind him, "though how well they work depends on the caster. The first one you'll learn in Charms is just called the Packing Charm. The incantation is *stipatomnia*. Think of all the items you want packed, then point at where you want them to go."

"Alright," Monty said, closing his eyes. He nodded, pointed his wand at his trunk, and said, "*Stipatomnia!*"

"I think that had a bit too much magic put into it," Harry observed as items hurtled into Monty's trunk. "If anything breaks, just use *reparo*."

Someone began shouting in the room next door.

Harry and Monty looked at each other, then left Monty's room to see what was going on. The shouting was coming from Ron and Percy's room. The door stood ajar.

"It was here, on the bedside table," Percy shouted. "I took it off for polishing—"

"I haven't touched it, alright?" Ron shouted back.

Monty pushed the door open. "What's going on?"

"My Head Boy badge has gone," Percy said, turning angrily towards them. He froze when he saw Harry, blushing furiously.

“So has Scabbers’ rat tonic,” Ron said, throwing his things around. “I think I might’ve left it in the bar—”

“You are not going *anywhere* until you’ve found my badge!” Percy snapped.

“Just use a summoning charm,” Harry suggested. “You’re of age, you’re allowed to do magic now.”

Percy closed his eyes, breathing raggedly. “You’re right. I should have thought of that first.” He pulled his wand out of his robes and said, “*Accio* badge!”

There were shouts of complaint from down the corridor, and Harry pulled Monty out of the way as the badge shot past and into Percy’s hand. Percy glared at it.

“Oh, very funny,” he said bitterly. He tapped the badge with his wand. “*Reparifarge*.”

“And what about my rat tonic?” Ron demanded, nearly as red as Percy.

“Fine,” Percy said. “As an apology for wrongfully accusing you. *Accio* rat tonic.”

Harry nudged Monty and they backed out of Percy’s room, pressing against the corridor wall as a small red bottle zipped past them. He spotted Fred and George giggling to themselves on the landing, obviously having been the ones to take the badge.

He was glad he had got him and Monty separate rooms. Harry hoped he and Monty never had a fight like that.

He hoped Monty wouldn’t hate him when he learned the truth.

Perfect Clarity

Chapter Summary

September 1st, 1993

Chapter Notes

Happy Boxing Day :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Percy sat on his bed, staring at his hands. He was seventeen. He was starting his seventh and last year at Hogwarts. He had taken all of the right classes, got all of the right grades, became a prefect, and was now Head Boy.

Ron was sprawled on his own bed, his things still thrown about the room. He snorted, smacked his lips, then rolled over, sighing in his sleep. Percy wondered what it felt like to have such a trouble-free life. He worried how Ron would survive in the real world.

There was a knock at the door and Percy stood. Ron snorted again. Percy walked over and opened the door. Tom was there, smiling toothlessly and bearing tea.

“Thank you,” Percy said, taking two cups. Tom had several others with him, and Percy saw him walk to Monty’s room and knock.

“What’s that?” Ron mumbled.

“Tea,” Percy said, setting the cups on the table. He was already dressed and packed. He had been up for hours. It was best for him to eat and take his litorin at the same time every day. He checked his watch, felt the single half dose left in his pocket. He needed it for the train ride.

Ron scrambled out of bed, accidentally bumping into the table. Some tea splashed out of the cups and onto the photograph Percy hadn’t yet packed.

“Ron,” he said, his voice strained. Percy picked up the photograph. It was a framed portrait of Penelope Clearwater. He had found it waiting for him when they had returned from Egypt. He had no idea what it was for. A belated birthday present? For being Head Boy? Some obligation of his as a boyfriend?

A drop of tea had landed on her nose, smudging it. The portrait-Penelope covered it and ran out of frame.

"You've got tea on this," Percy said, watching his brother gulp tea.

"Sorry," Ron said insincerely.

"Sorry doesn't fix it, Ronald," Percy said, shaking his head. He'd have to ask Penelope for another one, or fix it on his own. He couldn't display a photograph of her with a blotchy nose, that simply would not do.

"Don't call me that," Ron muttered, glaring insolently at him. "You sound like mum."

"You should have more respect for your things," Percy said, looking around their room. If he was going to be accused of sounding like their mother, he may as well give it his all.

"They're *my* things," Ron said. "I can do what I want with them!"

"That's true up until the point it starts interfering with other people's things," Percy said. "Like flinging tea about the room."

"I wasn't *flinging tea about the room*," Ron said. "It was an accident!"

"So you admit it?" Percy said, looking down at him.

"Oh, piss off," Ron said, finishing his tea and slamming the cup down. "It's too early to deal with you."

"I could say the same," Percy said, watching his brother storm out of the room. He shook his head, then looked at his brother's still unpacked trunk. He disliked doing his siblings' work for them, because it set a precedent. If he did a chore of theirs once, he'd be expected to do it every time, and if it went undone somehow they'd try to blame it on him. Then their mother would get upset, adding to the stress she was already under, and the bottom line was it would be better to just pack Ron's things for him.

As Harry had pointed out, he was legally permitted to do magic now. It wasn't that much effort. Their parents wouldn't be worried about last minute packing and running late. And if Ron's things ended up in the wrong places, too bad.

Percy spelled all of Ron's things into his trunk, then rubbed the back of his neck. Had he told Harry about the prefect's meeting on the train? It should have been in the letter McGonagall sent, but it wouldn't hurt to remind him.

Thusly decided, Percy walked to the door to join his family for breakfast. He paused with his hand on the doorknob.

Harry had seen him yelling at his younger brother about a badge. He felt his face heating up. It was so trivial, so childish. Harry had looked captivated by the scene. Percy imagined it was rather like watching a broom crash. Morbid fascination.

Percy shook his head. He couldn't get into petty squabbles with his siblings anymore. He was, technically, an adult. He took a moment to compose himself, then opened the door.

Downstairs, he found breakfast waiting. His father was reading the *Daily Prophet*. Sirius Black was on the front page again. Monty and Ron had abruptly stopped talking, the latter scowling at him. Fred and George looked far too entertained, and Percy hoped whatever they were up to was someone else's problem. He'd been their favorite target for years. He was tired. His mother was sitting with Hermione and Ginny, all three of them giggling about some story involving love potions.

Maybe that was the solution. A love potion.

Percy sat down next to his father.

"Harry, dear, we were wondering where you were!" his mother exclaimed, smiling sunnily.

Percy turned to the staircase and saw Harry standing there, looking mildly surprised to see everyone.

"Good morning," Harry said, smiling faintly.

Harry had changed over the summer. He had grown a little taller, and his hair was longer. It didn't stick all over the place like when he still wore his braces, but had been parted to one side. It almost reached his ears, which Harry had got pierced at some point. Percy wanted to know when, and why. What had precipitated the change? And the black nail varnish, accenting Harry's slender fingers. Every time Percy had seen him, Harry had been wearing some variation on black, but today he had on a shirt with a steaming sausage roll on it. He had his skateboard with him too, a painting of a winding green serpent on its underside. It had been charmed to move, its tongue occasionally flicking out. He held Lady Madeleine against one shoulder.

Harry looked at him, fixing Percy with his unfathomable black eyes. He'd never seen anyone with eyes quite that color before. Harry's eyes weren't merely dark brown, but pure black. They stood out against his pale skin. It was as if he had never seen the daylight, almost sickly. He was an anomaly.

Someone kicked him, and Percy winced.

"Pick your jaw up off the floor," Fred whispered. Percy turned to glare at him, but Fred only rolled his eyes. George kicked him again.

"Come join us for breakfast," his mother said, waving Harry over.

"Actually, I was going to head out," Harry said, jumping down the rest of the stairs.

"You aren't coming with us?" Monty asked, sounding a little concerned.

Harry smiled apologetically at him, lifting his skateboard. "This is the last time I'll see a sidewalk for ten months. Skate or die, you know?"

Apparently Monty knew, as he was the only one not mystified by this proclamation.

“What is he talking about?” his father whispered.

“His skateboard, Mr. Weasley,” Monty whispered back.

“Is it that thing he’s holding?”

“But what about your trunk?” his mother asked, looking around as if Harry had hidden it somewhere.

“I had someone shrink it for me,” Harry said easily, checking his watch. “I’ll see you all at the station. Enjoy your breakfast.”

Harry nodded at them, then walked towards the entrance to muggle London.

Monty was out of his seat before Harry got to the door, dragging Ron with him. “You’ve got to see this!”

“Wait, where are you going?” Hermione asked, hurrying after them.

Fred and George looked at each other, then grabbed Percy.

“Let’s go see what he’s up to,” George said, grinning at him.

“Get off of me,” Percy said, shaking them off. “I can walk myself.”

“Good boy,” Fred said. “Such a clever dog.”

Outside of the Leaky Cauldron, Harry was performing some tricks. Percy noticed Monty had been given Lady Madeleine to watch over, and the kitten was curled up in his arms.

“Bizarre,” Fred said.

“Interesting,” George said.

Their parents and Ginny joined them.

“Breakfast is getting cold,” their mother said. She gasped when she saw what Harry was up to. “Oh, my. Is that safe?”

“Safer than brooms,” Percy found himself replying.

Harry looked up, blushing when he noticed he had a small crowd. “I should probably go.”

He reached for Lady Madeleine, propping his kitten against his shoulder again.

“Muggle transportation indeed,” his father chuckled. “Are these skateboards common in the muggle world?”

“A bit, I suppose,” Harry said. “Not so much as bicycles.”

“Are you sure you’ll be alright?” his mother asked.

“I’ll be fine,” Harry assured her. He looked at all of them. “Well...bye.”

Then Harry was off, propelling himself down the sidewalk. There was an overturned bin in his path, and a collective gasp when he simply jumped over it, his skateboard flipping in the air, landing on the other side at speed, still holding his kitten.

“He’s mental,” Ron said.

“That looks dangerous,” Hermione said, frowning.

“He’s *really* cool,” Monty said, grinning as Harry jumped over another obstacle before disappearing around a corner.

“He’s really *something*, isn’t he, Percy?” Fred asked, elbowing him.

“Shut up,” Percy said, turning to go back inside. Their mother was right. Breakfast was getting cold.

After breakfast, things predictably descended into chaos and anomie. Ron wasn’t the only one who had left packing until the last minute. In fact, other than himself, Monty seemed to be the only one actually ready to leave. He was waiting by the door with his trunk and his owl, a pensive look on his face.

“Are you worried about something?” Percy asked, setting his trunk down and placing Hermes on top.

Monty shrugged, and Percy let it drop. He knew trying to get information out of his younger siblings was like pulling teeth, and in most cases wasn’t worth the effort. If they wanted to talk, they would talk, and probably not to Percy.

Eventually Hermione and Ron joined them. Percy’s mother was still upstairs, yelling at Fred, George, and Ginny, while his father waited anxiously outside.

Hermione had a wicker basket with her that was hissing.

“It’s alright, Crookshanks,” she cooed, putting her face dangerously close to the basket. “I’ll let you out on the train.”

“You won’t,” Ron said, putting a protective hand over his lumpy pocket. “What about poor Scabbers, eh?”

Percy was surprised how attached Ron had become to Scabbers. He wasn’t anything special, just a rat their mother had found in the kitchen one day, covered in scabs and oats. She had nursed him back to health, then given him to Percy to look after. Ron hadn’t seemed appreciative at all when Percy handed Scabbers down. Now he was carrying Scabbers around with him everywhere, buying him medicine, protecting him from cats. Maybe Ron wasn’t hopelessly irresponsible after all.

His father stuck his head back inside. "They're here. Monty, come on."

Monty was escorted outside by Percy's father. Percy had assumed the cars were for Monty's protection, as were the Ministry officials accompanying them. Aurors, no doubt.

In the car, Percy sat in between Ron and Hermione, separating Scabbers and Crookshanks. He wished Harry had come with them, but Percy knew Harry wanted to get in a few hours of skateboarding. Being a prefect meant he'd have less time to sneak around after hours, transfiguring the dungeon to better accommodate him. It would have been nice to sit next to Harry.

Percy stopped that line of thinking and stared out of the window. He'd be seeing Penelope again soon.

At King's Cross, his father took Monty through the barrier first, casually leaning against it until they fell through. Percy glanced at Ginny, who was anxiously looking at the barrier.

"Let's take it at a run," he suggested.

Ginny swallowed nervously, then nodded. They ran. Once through the barrier, Percy had to grab her trolley before it crashed into Monty.

Percy looked around, wondering if Harry was already on the train. No, he was wondering if Penelope was already there. He scanned the crowd, trying to see through the steam the Hogwarts Express pumped over the platform. He spotted a head of long, curly blonde hair.

"Ah, there's Penelope," he said. He patted his hair down, straightened his Head Boy badge, and strode over. Penelope was standing with her father and mother, Reginald and Catherine Clearwater. Reginald Clearwater was a prosecutor working for the International Confederation of Wizards' criminal court. Catherine Clearwater was the New Zealand Ministry's representative in the ICW.

"Percy, it's so lovely to see you again," Penelope said, smiling at him. She was smart. She was beautiful. She was perfect.

Percy smiled back.

"Ah, there's Penelope!"

Harry watched Percy hurry across the platform to where a pretty blonde girl stood with her generically pretty parents, all wearing fine robes.

Harry had already changed into his school robes, pinning his prefect and gobstone captain badges to it. He had arrived to the station early, securing a compartment for him and his

friends. He understood Monty was being given Ministry protection, if he had read Mr. Weasley correctly.

"I can't believe you didn't tell us you were a prefect," Astrid grumbled. She had cut nearly all her hair off again, and Harry was starting to wonder if needing to wear a helmet for quidditch was just an excuse.

"Who else would it be?" Cassius said, not looking up from his book. From the cover, it was about haruspicy, divination using entrails.

Harry frowned at his indifferent tone. "No hard feelings, right?"

Cassius looked up at him with a small smile. "We all saw the writing on the wall when you killed that troll."

"He *what*?" Phoebe exclaimed, turning on Harry. "You killed a *troll*?"

"How did you forget that?" Jasmine said, polishing her own prefect badge. She had attached filigree to it, elevating it to a fashion statement.

Astrid gave Harry a wounded look. "You could have at least told *me*."

"I wanted it to be a surprise," Harry said. In all honesty, he had forgotten. He had been preoccupied with potions and Monty and Sirius Black. "Surprise? Besides, I've been busy."

"With your boyfriend?" Adrian asked, grinning lasciviously.

"I haven't seen Cedric, actually," Harry said.

"You got your ears pierced too," Astrid said mulishly. "You should've taken me! I could've got all sorts of things pierced!"

"That bloke at the tattoo parlor was fit, eh?" Adrian asked.

"He was *gorgeous*," Phoebe said dreamily.

Astrid scoffed. "Who cares about that?"

The compartment door slid open, and Terence walked in. He looked around, spotting Harry and Jasmine's badges.

"Thought so," he said, sitting next to Cassius. "How was New York?"

"Humid," Cassius said, closing his book. "Something interesting did happen. A bit of an international incident that needed covering up."

"Oh?" Jasmine asked. "Do tell all."

"Someone tried to smuggle in a niffler," Cassius said. "You'll never guess who."

"Well?" Terence asked. "Go on."

Cassius looked around at them. "Gilderoy Lockhart."

"No!" Phoebe gasped, covering her mouth. "He wouldn't be that stupid!"

Jasmine gave her a flat look. "We were studying nifflers in Care last year."

"He would absolutely be that stupid," Harry said. "Probably thought he'd make a mint off of one."

"More like someone stuck it in with his things," Cassius said. "It had completely destroyed his trunk. When they checked his luggage, they found the niffler trying to fit Lockhart's Order of Merlin into its pouch."

There was a meow from Harry's robes.

"You've got a cat too?" Astrid exclaimed.

Harry pulled out Lady Madeleine and introduced her around, then looked at the platform. He saw Monty there, talking to Mr. Weasley. The train shuddered to life. There was a loud whistle, and the guards on the platform began shutting the doors. Just as the train began to move, Monty ran for a compartment. Shaking his head, Harry checked his watch.

"We've got to get to the prefect carriage," he said, taking Lady Madeleine back from Terence. "Prefect Rookwood and I have the glorious task of making sure no one falls off the train."

Adrian snorted. "Better you than me. You'd catch me dead before I grassed anyone up."

"I don't envy you," Cassius said. "Being a prefect comes with a cost."

"Read that in a black pudding, did you?" Astrid asked.

"Haggis, actually," Cassius said, smirking at her.

Harry shook his head. "We'll see you lot in a bit. I want to know what your quidditch camp was like."

Astrid's eyes lit up. "I met Gwendolyn Morgan!"

"Isn't she retired?" Terence asked.

Harry and Jasmine left the compartment as Astrid regaled their friends with the exploits of Gwendolyn Morgan, former Holyhead Harpies captain.

"You did that on purpose," Jasmine said as they walked to the prefect carriage at the front of the train. "She won't shut up for hours."

"I know," Harry said, grinning at her. "She'll be clobbering Adrian over the head with her broom by the time we get back."

"How are things going with Cedric?" she asked.

They passed filled compartments, panicking first-years, people talking and laughing, many using magic openly for the first time in months.

Harry shrugged. "I haven't talked to him much. We'll see him shortly. He's a prefect too. And quidditch captain."

Jasmine gave him a level look. "I take it you neglected to share that information with Astrid?"

Harry wrinkled his nose. "I don't look forward to my best mate and my boyfriend being enemies."

Jasmine was silent for a moment. "Harry, about Cedric. Don't you think he's a bit..."

Harry looked at her. "A bit what?"

"A bit of a gimboird?"

Harry snorted. "He's not an idiot."

"No," Jasmine admitted. "But he is somewhat naive, I think." She sighed. "Phoebe said in a letter to me that you two and Adrian were, and I quote, *slumming it* in Knockturn?"

"We perambulated," Harry said, holding the door to the next carriage open for her.

Jasmine rolled her eyes. "Right, well. I get the impression that's what Cedric's doing with you."

"Jasmine—"

"I'm sorry," she said, holding up her hands. "Someone had to say it. You're too good for him, Harry."

Harry crossed his arms, frowning. "Some would say it was the other way round."

Jasmine sighed again. "Don't sell yourself short. He's not entitled to your time."

"I know that," Harry said.

"To be fair, I think anyone would be overwhelmed if they had been pursued so aggressively," Jasmine said, glancing at him.

"We should change topics," Harry said icily. "We're almost there. And I think Astrid would like to be included in this discussion of ours."

"I'm not *judging* you," Jasmine said. "I don't care about the whole quidditch rivalry tot."

"Tot?" Harry asked. "Should a prefect be using such strong language around innocent ears?"

"Shove off," Jasmine said, pushing him lightly. "You look marvelous, by the way. Very rakish."

“Thanks,” Harry said, blushing faintly. “I like what you’ve done with your hair. I’ve only seen it in braids, I think.”

Jasmine smiled at him, patting her coiled tresses. “It’s only a twist out, but thank you.”

“I think this is it,” Harry said, opening the door to the carriage just before the driver’s. There were six compartments, enough for people to sit with prefects from their own houses, or their own year, one for the Head Boy and Head Girl, one large enough to fit them all. Harry and Jasmine went to the last, and happened to be the last to arrive. There was one long table around which two dozen people sat, and two open seats for him and Jasmine.

“There you are,” Percy said, checking something off on a roll of parchment. “Very good, we can begin our first meeting of the year. We shall start with introductions.”

Harry looked around the room, smiling briefly at Cedric, who was sitting with the other Hufflepuff prefects. Cedric gaped at him for a moment, then smiled. It looked a bit off. Harry decided to ignore it, joining his fellow Slytherin prefects. Gemma Farley and Elijah McDowell, the seventh-year prefects. Francis Overcliff and Annabeth Sallow, the sixth-year prefects. And now Harry Evans and Jasmine Rookwood, fifth-year prefects.

“I am Percy Weasley, Head Boy and seventh-year Gryffindor prefect,” Percy said, looking at each of them. “Penny?”

Penelope Clearwater smiled. “Penelope Clearwater, Head Girl and seventh-year Ravenclaw prefect.”

Percy and Penny. How adorable.

Harry tried to remember all of their names, but he hadn’t interacted with most of them, outside of Cedric and Percy. There was Alicia Spinnet, who was on the Gryffindor quidditch team, and Kenneth Towler, who played gobstones. To his dismay, Haruka Endo was the other Hufflepuff prefect. Harry hoped he didn’t get any rounds with her. And someone had made her their gobstones captain, that was lovely. From Ravenclaw there were Marcus Turner and Noreen Kirkby, both of whom he recognized from Arithmancy.

After Harry and Jasmine had introduced themselves, the meeting began.

“First of all, congratulations to our new prefects,” Penelope said, smiling kindly at them. “As prefects, you are expected to set an example for your peers. That is to say, an adherence to the rules. The professors would not have chosen you if they thought you incapable of this.”

Her eyes lingered on the Slytherin prefects as she said this. Harry thought it was a bit rich given he’d seen her baps out.

“You will be assigned prefect rounds, which extend beyond curfew,” Percy said, passing around scrolls of parchment. “Don’t take advantage of that privilege. The pairs and routes are randomly chosen, and are shuffled at the end of every month. If you are for some reason unable to make a round, speak to either Penny or myself as soon as possible. Shifts can be exchanged, but please do not abuse that option.”

“There is a prefect lounge adjacent to the first-floor staffroom,” Penelope said. “We have weekly meetings every Friday evening. These are obligatory, so if any team or club activities occur at this time, you will need to reschedule them. The prefects’ bathroom is on the fifth floor, the fourth door to the left of the statue of Boris the Bewildered. The password is *chocolatey delicious*.”

There was a little *meow* and Lady Madeleine poked her head out of Harry’s robes.

Penelope looked disapprovingly at him. “What is that?”

“She is Lady Madeleine,” Harry said, keeping still as his kitten clawed the rest of the way out, climbing up to his shoulder.

“Pets are not allowed in here,” Penelope said tartly.

“Is that so?” Gemma Farley asked, glancing at Harry. “I don’t recall that being a rule in the past. Was it in the letter this year?”

“She’s a kitten,” Harry said, not sure why Lady Madeleine was an issue. Did Penelope hate cats? “And in training.”

“Training?” Penelope asked.

Percy cleared his throat. “Mrs. Norris is a valued member of the staff, and often assists Mr. Filch in his duties. By all appearances the kitten is a half-kneazle, and would be an aid to Evans.”

Penelope sniffed. “I suppose we can allow it. Make sure it isn’t a distraction.”

Harry bit his tongue, suppressing the urge to laugh, and nodded solemnly.

“Moving on,” Percy said, “as I am sure you are all aware, Sirius Black is currently a fugitive and has yet to be apprehended by the Ministry. As such, the Ministry has dispatched dementors to guard Hogwarts.”

This information was taken poorly by all

Next to him, Jasmine stiffened. Harry closed his eyes. Her father was in Azkaban, and almost as notorious as Sirius Black. Had she ever visited him? Had her mum? Were people even allowed visitors? And who would want to go there?

Harry took Lady Madeleine from his shoulder and placed her in Jasmine’s lap, where she began to purr.

“The dementors will be stationed at the school’s gates,” Percy continued. “Nevertheless, their influence may be felt by anyone on the grounds. All prefects will be required to carry chocolate with them at all times in order to treat symptoms of dementor sickness. Additionally, time will be set aside during our weekly meetings to practice the Patronus Charm.”

Harry looked at him, surprised. He had only suggested it the day before, and Percy had seemed on the fence.

“Who’s going to teach us *that*?” one of the Ravenclaw prefects asked.

“I believe Evans has some experience with it,” Percy said, looking at him.

Suddenly, everyone was looking at Harry.

He didn’t so much as twitch. “I can cast a non-corporeal patronus. I know the theory. We could also ask one of the professors. I know the headmaster can conjure a patronus, as well as the heads of house.”

“Professor Dumbledore doesn’t have time to teach students,” Penelope said dismissively.

“Then why is he called *professor*?” Elijah McDowell muttered, drawing snickers from the other Slytherins.

“Non-corporeal will suffice for our purposes,” Percy said, straightening some papers. “If a dementor goes rogue, we want to be able to hold them off long enough to get help.”

“Do you think that’ll happen?” Alicia Spinnet asked worriedly.

“Forewarned is forearmed,” Percy said shortly. “Now, we are meant to be patrolling the train. This is done in hour-long shifts, which you will find already assigned.”

Harry opened his scroll, revealing a calendar with his rounds marked. At the top was a note telling him he and Jasmine had the last shift for patrolling the train.

They were dismissed, and Harry filed out of the compartment with the rest of the prefects. Lady Madeleine crawled back into his robes, still purring.

Someone grabbed his arm.

“Over here,” Cedric whispered, pulling him into one of the empty compartments. Harry caught Jasmine’s eye before the door slid shut. She gave him a significant look, then was gone.

Cedric pushed him against a wall, then leaned down and kissed him.

“I missed you,” Cedric breathed, smiling at him. His hands slid down to Harry’s waist. Harry shuddered.

“It’s nice to see you too,” he said evenly.

Lady Madeleine stuck her head out and gave a little hiss.

Cedric pulled back, surprised. “Sorry. You look different.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, not sure what Cedric meant.

“So,” Cedric said, “you know we can use the prefects’ bathroom this year.”

Harry’s stomach coiled with anxiety. He and public bathrooms didn’t mix. If someone tried to get into his dormitory bathroom while he was bathing they’d be knocked unconscious by the spells he put up.

“I was thinking—”

The door slid open, and Cedric sprang away from him.

“It hasn’t even been five minutes,” Penelope said, shaking her head. “We expect *some* decorum. If you two can’t behave yourselves, you won’t be allowed on rounds together. There are *children* on this train!”

“Now, now, Penny,” Percy said drily. “I’m sure they were simply excited to see each other.”

“A little too excited,” Penelope said disdainfully. “Run along, you two. This carriage isn’t for your...sordid affair.”

“Oh, god,” Harry muttered. He hadn’t wanted or asked for any of this. Why couldn’t Gemma be Head Girl? She would have laughed and shut the door again. “My apologies, Miss Clearwater. I need to speak with the other Slytherin prefects about the incoming first-years.” He glanced at Cedric, who looked chagrined. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Harry slipped out of the compartment and left the carriage. The year was off to a roaring start.

Monty glanced at the shabbily dressed wizard in their compartment. So that was Remus Lupin. He wasn’t going to judge the man for his clothes and apparent poverty. Monty had worn plenty of shabby clothes in his life, and only had got things that fit once Harry had bullied him into a department store. But knowing his parents had friends, friends who had never once in his life contacted him if only to let him know they existed, sat very poorly with him.

Mr. Weasley had given him dire warnings to not chase after Sirius Black, to be a good boy and stay in the castle. Monty had nodded along. Harry had cautioned him that some of the things he had shared—the Fidelius, the secret-keeper, the godfather—were things he wasn’t supposed to know. That there was no explanation for why Monty would know them. Harry hadn’t revealed the source of his information, but Monty didn’t doubt the truth of it, particularly given Mr. Weasley’s behavior. He was resolved to ask Hagrid about Sirius Black. Hagrid couldn’t keep a secret.

Monty had struggled with whether to tell Ron and Hermione about Sirius Black, ultimately deciding against it. Hermione would want to know how he knew. He would have to lie to her.

It was easier not to say anything at all.

What now troubled Monty was his Sneakoscope going off. Luna had been the one to point it out. She had skipped into the compartment and plopped down next to him, totally ignoring Ron telling her to get out. Neither Ron nor Hermione were very tolerant of Luna's idiosyncrasies. Several months out of school had made Monty forget how they clashed. Well, Ron and Hermione clashed. Luna was more of an unyielding cliff, the waves of their annoyance breaking futilely against her.

The Sneakoscope had been stuffed into an old pair of Uncle Vernon's socks, but Monty wondered. Why had it gone off? Was it defective? Was Lupin hiding something? Hiding that he had known Monty's parents?

Monty got drawn into a conversation about Hogsmeade. He was a little proud of his deception with Aunt Petunia. If it hadn't worked, he was sure Harry would have found a way. Maybe disguising it as a permission form for the St. Brutus' boot camp.

Hermione had let Crookshanks out for some reason, and had got into it with Ron. Monty rolled his eyes, and turned to Luna, who was reading a *Quibbler* back issue.

"What was Suriname like?" Monty asked. "Did you find any duppies?"

Luna turned to him, smiling broadly. Her eyes were very big, almost unnervingly so. "Oh, yes. It was quite startling."

"Tell me all about it," Monty said, Hermione and Ron's bickering fading into the background.

"Was it a good idea to tell Adrian you had a wireless?" Jasmine asked as they left for their patrol.

"He would have found out one way or another," Harry said.

"Now you'll be the bloke with the wireless," she said.

"It's a real coup for blokedom," Harry said wryly. "A wireless."

"On your head be it," Jasmine said, walking towards the front of the train. "It's going to be a nightmare when play-offs start."

"You think I don't know that?" Harry called out. "That's what doubling charms are for!"

Jasmine only shook her head, the door to the next carriage shutting behind her. Harry had offered to take the back half of the train, not particularly wanting to run into any other prefects. They were almost at Hogwarts, and he had successfully hidden among his friends

for hours. It had already been a long day. He still had to get through the sorting, the feast, the first-years, meeting with his dad...

“Meow.”

“I know,” Harry said, pulling Lady Madeleine out. “You can sleep through this if you want. You already sleep twenty hours a day, why not a few more?”

The last patrol shift on the train wasn't necessarily the calmest. The closer they got to Hogwarts, the more the excitement grew. It was dark, though, and cold, and the rain had started to pick up.

Harry walked to the end of the train, wondering which compartment his brother had ended up in. He glanced through windows, nodding to people he recognized, moving from car to car. He reached the end of the train, finding Monty and his friends, including Luna, in the last compartment. He was surprised to see Remus Lupin with them. Harry knew he'd be on the train, his dad had told him as much, but had assumed he'd be up front. What were the odds Monty would end up in the same compartment?

Harry didn't linger long and started walking back up the train, asking people to not run or do magic in the corridor. That was all he did, walk up and down the train, making sure everything was fine.

The train began to slow. Harry checked his watch and frowned. They couldn't be at Hogsmeade Station yet. And the train was slowing quite rapidly. People began sticking their heads out of their compartments, looking at Harry questioningly. He had no idea why the train was slowing, and was about to go to the front to find out what was going on when it came to a sudden halt. He braced himself against the wall. He could hear trunks and cages falling, the angry squawks of owls and cats, injured students groaning, some crying. Then all the lights went out.

“For fuck's sake,” Harry said, getting his wand out. “*Lumos*.”

He felt around his robes and pulled out a vial of Calming Draught, pulling the cork out with his teeth and downing it. It didn't help. Some people were trying to leave their compartments.

“Stay where you are,” Harry said loudly. There was something highly unusual going on, and he didn't need a bunch of students running around. He hurried towards the carriage his brother was in. He could only think of one explanation for the train stopping. The train being *made* to stop.

Sirius Black.

He sprinted down the corridor, and the carriage door slammed open in response to his panic. Everything was suddenly cold, silent, so dark his *lumos* couldn't hardly penetrate it. He could see his breath in the cool light of his wand. The final door opened, and Harry froze.

There, at the end of the train, in front of his brother's compartment, was a dementor. Its ragged cloak rippled in some unseen wind. A putrid, scabrous grey hand emerged, reaching for the compartment door. The sight filled Harry with an unspeakable dread. He could hear someone coughing weakly. Such an unremarkable thing that made him so incredibly sad. Sad and afraid. Alone. He was always going to be alone.

Harry shook his head, glaring at the dementor. Monty was in danger.

"Get away from him!" he shouted.

The dementor paused, then turned towards him, the action itself exuding a hopeless malaise, the light of his wand limning its malignant shadows.

Monty was in danger.

Harry's eyes widened.

He knew, in a moment of perfect clarity, what his patronus was.

It was love.

He loved his brother, more than anything else in the world. He would do anything to keep him safe, to make sure he was happy. He would do *anything* to protect Monty.

And a dementor was trying to take his brother away from him.

Harry didn't waste any more time thinking about it. He knew what he had to do.

"*Expecto patronum!*" Harry roared, pointing his wand with fatal accuracy at the wretched creature sent to destroy the most important person in his life.

His patronus exploded out of his wand, bright and dazzling, filling the corridor with its light and warmth. It raced towards the dementor. The dementor let out a voiceless cry, then fled into the night and rain.

Harry hoped it was the only one, because he was feeling very tired. He sagged against the wall, watching as his patronus came back to him. It moved in an odd way. It didn't walk, or fly, but seemed to be swimming. It took Harry a moment to understand what it was.

"A lobster," he said as it swam closer. "I don't even...I'm allergic to shellfish."

His lobster patronus didn't care about that, floating merrily in front of him. Harry decided it didn't matter, so long as it helped Monty. After a moment, his lobster patronus faded away.

Harry slumped to the ground, shaking and overwhelmed.

A compartment door slid open. Monty's compartment door. Harry gripped his wand. If there was another dementor...

But it was Remus Lupin, looking curiously at him. Harry swayed with dizziness, wincing at the sudden pain in his stomach

“Are you alright?” Lupin asked, stepping cautiously into the corridor. “That was quite impressive, a corporeal patronus at your—”

Harry lurched forward and retched onto the floor.

“—age,” Lupin finished, hurrying forward. He wordlessly vanished the vomit, then knelt down next to Harry. “Was that the first time you’ve done it?”

“Yes,” Harry said hoarsely, wiping his mouth. “Is...Potter okay?”

“He is,” Lupin said. “Let’s get you into a seat, shall we? I’ll need to speak with the driver.”

“Imbecilic,” Harry said, “to stop for dementor hitchhikers.”

Lupin chuckled, then helped Harry stand. “I agree. So, are you friends with Monty?”

Lady Madeleine chose that moment to climb out of Harry’s robes and butt her head against his cheek.

“Are you alright?” Harry asked as she began to purr. It made him feel a little better.

Lupin chuckled again. “Dementors don’t affect animals as strongly as people.”

“Fascinating,” Harry mumbled, following Lupin into Monty’s compartment. Monty, Luna, Hermione, and Ron were there, as were Neville and Ginny for whatever reason. All looked shaken, but Monty and Luna were the worst off.

Harry sat down across from them, leaning back.

“You cast a patronus,” Monty said, smiling weakly at him.

“Yeah,” Harry said, closing his eyes, his kitten’s purrs reverberating through him. “I did.”

[Fanart](#) for this chapter by UnfriendlyMollusk!

A Smoking Goblet

Chapter Summary

It's still September 1st, 1993

Chapter Notes

Hi!

The comments last chapter were amazing! I love all the theories and character analysis. The lobster. Oh, the lobster.

I used to go crabbing when I was really young. Throw a chicken in a cage and let those fuckers go to town. I don't even eat shellfish, it makes me sick.

“Well, that was awful,” Penelope said with a delicate shudder. Rain was falling in icy sheets around them, pinging off the shields conjured above their heads. Penelope had charmed her boots and robes impervious to keep the mud off.

“Indeed,” Percy said, holding the carriage door open for her. He ignored the thestrals. It had been a shock seeing them in second year, weeks after he had seen his Uncle Bilius drop dead in the garden. His mother hadn’t made him join in degnoming since that incident.

“It’s a good thing Evans knows the Patronus Charm,” Penelope continued, adjusting her robes as she sat. “I was skeptical about your idea initially, but I agree we ought to prepare ourselves.”

“I am pleased we have an accord,” Percy said, sitting across from her. “I could scarcely believe it when Father told me about the dementors.”

Penelope sighed, then gave a dainty sneeze. “Oh, goodness. I hope I haven’t got kneazle fur on me.”

“Surely it isn’t so bad with a half-kneazle?” Percy asked.

“I suppose we’ll see,” Penelope said, conjuring a pretty lace handkerchief for herself.

Percy didn’t let himself relax into the plush bench he sat on, keeping his back rigid. The dementors had affected him worse than he had let on.

When the train stopped, when the lights went out, when that relentless cold swept through the carriages, he had pressed on to make sure all of the students were safe. He had seen the dementors scratching at the windows, their shadowed hoods obscuring those vile mouths, leaching all happiness from them. Forcing him to think of all the things he avoided, memories he had tried to bury. His father never coming home. His mother, pregnant and crying in the kitchen. Learning at five-years-old he had an incurable condition. That it was his fault. That he was a burden.

The dementors stripped away the illusion.

Percy closed his eyes, taking an unsteady breath. It had got better when he started at Hogwarts. Soon he would no longer be a burden to them.

Halfway through the train, crushed by the knowledge there was nothing he could do to protect his fellow students, Percy had heard him.

“Get away from him!”

It was insane to yell at a dementor. Percy had no idea how the Ministry communicated with them. He suspected the dementors absorbed the emotions of whoever was making the attempt, then acted how they saw fit. And yet Harry had defiantly shouted at one, heedless of the futility.

“Expecto patronum!”

Percy had felt it when Harry cast his patronus. The desolation enveloping him had fallen away, consumed by a pervasive warmth. He wished he had seen it. Would Harry show him? He would have to if he was teaching them, and there was no doubt now he was capable of casting the spell.

Percy cleared his throat. “What do you think of the new prefects?”

“I think they’ll do well,” Penelope said, glancing out the window to where Hogwarts rose above them, shrouded in darkness and rain. “They pick the best they can given the limited options. Diggory needs to learn to control himself. Honestly!” She prudishly crossed her legs, smoothing her robes. “I understand some may be given to certain ignoble proclivities, but he could use some discretion.”

Percy nodded. Seeing Cedric Diggory looming over Harry, the flush on Harry’s cheeks... “There’s a time and a place for everything.”

“And Evans needs to learn some class,” Penelope continued. “He’s an orphan, so of course he’s not had anyone to teach him comportment and self-respect. Not to mention he’s a muggleborn, and you know how they always struggle.”

“They have a lot of barriers,” Percy said neutrally.

“Shame he wasn’t in Ravenclaw,” Penelope sighed. “He could have learned how to properly elevate himself.” She leaned forward and gave him a fond pat on his knee. Percy felt a wave

of revulsion. "Shake the dirt off his roots, you know?"

"A shame," Percy said.

"At least he has escaped *some* of the less savory impulses of his house," she said darkly. "I would hate to see a promising boy like that become little more than a catamite."

Percy looked at her in alarm. "That is a myth."

"Perhaps in the Commonwealth," Penelope said. "You should hear some of the cases Father gets. There are some rather primitive practices people engage in, particularly among dark wizards." She shuddered again. "Rookwood seems a bit frivolous, don't you agree? Must be owing to that father of hers in Azkaban. Poor thing, she hasn't had *any* decent influence in her life."

Percy nodded absently, wishing, not for the first time, he had listened to the Hat. But Weasleys and Prewetts always went to Gryffindor, and he was both. His mother didn't need anything else to cry about.

"Granger! Evans!"

Harry's head snapped up at his name. He'd been in a daze since the train stopped at the station, the same old memories repeating themselves.

The coughing, the bloody tissues, the labored breathing, the hiss of the respirator, the agonizing pace of a slow death.

Luna had taken his hand and led him to the carriages. His first day as a prefect, and he could barely walk straight.

Harry gently let go of Luna's hand and waded through the crowd of students. He hoped whatever it was didn't keep him from his prefect duties. He didn't want to leave Jasmine in a lurch.

"Yes, professor?" he said when he reached McGonagall. He saw Madam Pomfrey was with her, looking worriedly at him.

"You're to go with Madam Pomfrey," McGonagall said, looking sharply at him. "Professor Lupin sent an owl ahead informing us of the events on the train."

"I'm fine," Harry began.

"I'm afraid your head of house insists," McGonagall said impatiently. "Granger, I'd like a word in my office."

Harry watched Hermione and McGonagall walk up the marble staircase.

“This way, Mr. Evans,” Madam Pomfrey said, guiding him into a small chamber just off the entrance hall.

“I had a Calming Draught,” Harry said as soon as the door was closed.

Madam Pomfrey nodded, reaching out to feel his forehead. “How about chocolate?” She took his wrist to feel his pulse.

Harry shook his head. “The only kind Professor Lupin had had peanuts in it.”

Madam Pomfrey sighed, then removed a plain bar of dark chocolate from her apron. “Eat all of this.”

“Is there muggle chocolate?” Harry asked innocently.

Madam Pomfrey narrowed her eyes at him. “Plenty of it. I’m going to give you once over to make sure you’re not out of sorts. Fifth-years casting patroni, what has the world come to...”

Harry ate his chocolate and felt warmth blossom through him. His stomach settled, the scent of his gran’s dying body fading back to dim memory. Madam Pomfrey waved her wand around, muttering to herself. After a few minutes, she tucked her wand back into her apron.

“Well, you need a good night’s sleep, but otherwise you’re fine,” she said. “Let’s go to the feast.”

They left the chamber in time to see Hermione and McGonagall coming back down the stairs. Harry looked intently at Hermione’s neck and saw a flash of gold. He had wondered, seeing all the books she had purchased. It seemed Hermione was getting a Time-Turner. If Harry had known the secret to time travel lay in taking too many courses, he would have signed up for more options.

Professor Flitwick was just finishing the sorting, with one boy remaining.

“Wilkes, Derek!”

The Sorting Hat fell over Derek’s eyes, and after a few moments called out, “Slytherin!”

Harry clapped politely, then skirted the Great Hall to get to the Slytherin table. There was a spot for him between Jasmine and Astrid, and he gratefully sank into it.

“I couldn’t find you,” Jasmine whispered. She was clammy, shaking slightly. “I saw them in the rain. I thought they...”

“I’m fine,” Harry said with more vigor than he felt.

“Is it true?” Adrian asked, leaning forward from across the table. “You conjured a patronus?”

Harry nodded, then looked at the head table as the headmaster stood to address them. His dad was looking at him, and Harry gave him a faint smile. His dad looked disturbingly calm. Harry assumed that meant he was near apoplectic with fury.

“...Dementors are not to be fooled by tricks or disguises, or even invisibility cloaks,” the headmaster was saying. “It is not in the nature of a dementor to understand pleading or excuses.”

Getting their attention worked, though. Maybe it had just seen him as a more accessible victim.

“...I look to the prefects, and our Head Boy and Girl, to make sure no student runs foul of the dementors. In fact, it seems one of our new fifth-year prefects has done just that with a remarkable display of advanced magic.”

Dumbledore turned to smile at him, and Harry smiled blandly back. The dementors shouldn't have been on the train in the first place.

“On a happier note,” Dumbledore continued, finally looking away from him, “I am pleased to welcome two new teachers to our ranks this year...”

Harry released the breath he was holding, clapping for the newly anointed Professor Lupin. He already knew Hagrid was the new Care of Magical Creatures professor. There was an uproar at the Gryffindor table at the announcement, Monty and his friends among the most enthused. Harry glanced at Luna, who he knew had an interest in magical creatures, and saw she was strangely subdued. She loved rounds of applause. Perhaps she was still impacted by her proximity to a dementor.

“Enjoy his remaining *limbs*?” Astrid said of Kettleburn. “He's only got the one!”

“Is it too late to drop Care?” Jasmine asked. “I don't doubt Hagrid is knowledgeable, but this is our O.W.L. year.”

“Self-study it is,” Cassius said.

“You don't even take Care,” Astrid said.

“That was a matter of prescience, my dear,” Cassius said soberly.

Harry frowned. Cassius had an interest in divination before third year. He wouldn't be surprised if Cassius had selected his courses using it.

After Dumbledore's closing remarks, the feast appeared before them. Harry wasn't very hungry, his stomach still felt tender, but he made himself eat.

“What are our first-years' names?” he asked Jasmine as they finished their pudding.

“There's Astoria Greengrass,” she said, looking up from the crumbs of her pumpkin tart. “Daphne Greengrass' sister. Derek Wilkes, Andrea Gibbon, Jason Mulciber, Mephistopheles Thorne—”

Adrian started choking on his tart. Terence thumped his back.

“—and Penelope Padgett.”

“Great,” Harry said, standing as Dumbledore sent them off to bed. He walked towards where the first-years were clustered, Jasmine at his side.

“Greetings, first-years,” Harry said, smiling down at them. They looked at him with wide eyes. “My name is Harry Evans.” He glanced at Jasmine.

“I’m Jasmine Rookwood,” she said, smiling warmly at them.

Lady Madeleine meowed, a demand to be introduced. Harry rolled his eyes and pulled her out to show off to the first-years. If anything, they were even more awed.

“What are all your names?” Harry asked. “Let’s start with you,” he said, looking at a dark-haired girl who resembled Daphne.

“Astoria Greengrass,” she said quietly, her eyes darting to her sister, who was standing nearby with Tracey Davis and Blaise Zabini.

Harry looked at the boy next to her.

“Derek Wilkes,” he squeaked.

They went around, Penelope Padgett thankfully introducing herself as Nel.

“It’s nice to meet you all,” Harry said, echoed by Jasmine.

“Harry and I will be taking you down to the common room,” Jasmine said. “Hogwarts Castle is very big, and very confusing, which is why I have drawn these maps.”

Harry raised an eyebrow as Jasmine produced maps for the first-years. “The staircases move around, so paths to classrooms will change. If you get lost, or stuck, just look for a prefect.”

“To the common room?” Harry suggested, watching as the first-years flipped through the stacks of paper they had been given. “You can look through your maps later. For now, let’s work on memorizing the turns from the entrance hall to the common room.”

Jasmine led the way, and the first-years followed after her. They really were like ducklings. Harry brought up the rear, thinking over what information the first-years needed right away. There were so many little things about Hogwarts. How to deal with Peeves, secret passages, missing and trick steps, when which staircases went where, what the professors were like...

They reached the common room before he knew it.

“The password to our common room,” Jasmine said, catching his eye, “is *patronus*.”

Severus sighed in relief when there was a knock on his door. He was sick of looking at the smoking goblet on his desk, sick with worry for his son, and already sick of school. The term hadn't even begun before a student—his *son*—had been attacked by a dementor.

Harry opened the door, looking tired but otherwise healthy. Severus felt a mixture of pride and frustration at his son's actions.

"You have conjured a corporeal patronus," he said, pushing a tray towards his son. It had coffee, and some of the caraway biscuits Harry favored.

"I was under duress," Harry said, smiling as he picked up the coffee. "It was a lobster."

"Interesting," he said. He had no idea what a lobster could mean for his son, and it filled him with a sense of unease.

"I was worried it would be a lion," Harry admitted. "It would have given away everything."

"That would have been hard to explain," Severus agreed. "I heard you'll be teaching the other prefects how to perform the charm?"

Harry sighed, his eyes closing. "I talked to Percy about it first. I was planning on asking one of you, but since I've actually done it now I think I'll be roped into it. And I've got to teach Monty too. I swear to god, that dementor was targeting him."

Severus picked up the note Lupin had sent McGonagall. Had he assumed Harry was in Gryffindor? "It says you shouted something before casting the patronus."

Harry grimaced. "I said *get away from him*. I could pass it off as a bad memory induced by the dementor."

Severus rubbed his forehead, watching Harry as he drank his coffee. If anyone would work out his connection to Harry, it would be someone who actually knew Lily Evans. Who knew him. But he had something over Lupin. If he did anything to harm Harry, Severus would expose him as a werewolf.

Harry looked at the smoking goblet on the table. "Is that the Wolfsbane?"

"It is," Severus said. "You will be delivering it to Lupin."

Harry snorted into his coffee. "That's a more than fair trade for everything you did this summer. Thank you."

"You have yet to endure Lupin's presence for an extended period of time."

"He seemed nice," Harry said. "Genuinely nice." Harry furrowed his brow in thought. "You learned he had lycanthropy while you were in school. Either you overheard someone talking about it, or you actually saw him as a werewolf."

“Neither,” Severus said, smiling at his son.

Harry scowled, then took a biscuit. “I could just ask Lupin.”

“If he’s *nice*,” Severus said, sneering slightly, “he won’t tell you.” Severus reached into his desk and pulled out a permission form for the Restricted Section. Harry watched silently as he filled it out, then Severus passed it to him.

“Is this...” Harry said, staring wide-eyed at the form.

“You’ve earned it,” Severus said, enjoying his son’s reaction. “Better than asking someone to sneak out books for you.”

Harry blushed, and Severus knew he had got it right.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry said, his eyes not leaving the form. He looked up and smiled at him. “Thanks, dad.”

Severus still couldn’t quite believe it. Had it really been only a year since he learned he was Harry’s father? That he had a son? That he still had a family?

“None of that,” he said levelly. He turned to the papers on his desk. He needed to review his lesson plans for the next day. “Once you’re finished with your digestif, take that to Lupin directly.”

Harry yawned then rubbed his face, carrying the goblet of Wolfsbane with him. The goblet was pure silver, necessary to stabilize the potion. His dad wanted him to deliver the potion and watch Lupin drink it, seven days a month. He wrinkled his nose as a bubble that had formed burst, releasing grossly pungent blue smoke.

Harry reached the second floor, then knocked on the door of the Defense professor’s office.

“Come in,” Lupin called out, sounding exhausted. It wasn’t surprising, so close to the full moon.

Harry opened the door and stuck his head in. Lupin was at his desk, frowning over some parchment, idly dipping his quill into an inkwell. A pot of tea sat on the desk, steam lazily drifting from its spout. Lupin looked up from his work, his eyebrows rising in surprise for a moment, and then he smiled.

“I was expecting Professor Snape,” Lupin said, tapping ink from his quill and setting it down. “Harry Evans, correct?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, stepping into the room. He shut the door behind him and looked around.

The office had drastically changed since he had last seen it. The signed photographs of Lockhart were all gone. It was a vast improvement.

“I like what you’ve done with the place,” Harry said, walking to Lupin’s desk.

Lupin chuckled. “Yes. I’ve heard my predecessor was rather vain.”

“I think that’s an understatement, sir,” Harry said, setting the goblet of Wolfsbane on his desk. It belched another cloud of blue smoke.

“Thank you, Harry,” Lupin said, picking up the goblet and sniffing it. Harry was surprised to be addressed by his given name. No other professors did that.

“I’ve been feeling a bit under the weather,” Lupin said, taking a sip and shuddering.

“I imagine you’ll be feeling under the weather around the same time every month,” Harry said. Lupin stiffened, then gave him a searching look. “I know what that is, professor, I helped brew it.”

Lupin sighed, then took another sip. “I suppose that’s one way to get around the headmaster’s edict.”

“Professor Snape wants me to watch you finish it,” Harry said apologetically. “It’s for your benefit too.”

Lupin gave him another look. “It doesn’t bother you?”

“Of course not,” Harry said. “I wish there was a better treatment, though. The person who invented it cared more about efficacy and his bottom line than the well-being of the consumer.”

Lupin raised an eyebrow. “That’s a bold claim to make.”

“I think the cost of the potion, that a drop of it would kill a muggle in a matter of seconds, and the lack of a palliative component, or a complimentary potion that acts as an analgesic, bears that out.”

Lupin finished drinking his Wolfsbane, made a face of disgust, then drank some of his tea. “The taste alone is enough to prove your point.”

Harry picked the goblet back up, checking to make sure the contents were completely gone. “Thank you for putting up with me. Have a good night, professor.”

“Good night, Harry,” Lupin said, turning back to his work.

Harry left the office, closing the door silently behind him.

Monty lay on his bed, listening to the sleepy noises his dormmates made. Ron snored like a freight train, and while the sound had become familiar over the years, comforting in that Monty knew he wasn't alone, wasn't back in the cupboard, at the moment it grated against his nerves.

He was home, but something was missing.

He wouldn't get to talk to Harry every day anymore. They wouldn't get lunch together, or play games together. Harry wouldn't be teaching him magic, indifferent to laws and ominous letters from the Ministry.

Monty hadn't regretted rejecting the Hat's offer of Slytherin. He had his best mates Ron and Hermione, and all of Ron's brothers and his sister. Neville, Seamus, Dean, Oliver, Angelina, Alicia, Katie, even Lavender and Parvati. He had friends in Gryffindor. He got to play quidditch. His parents had been in Gryffindor. So had Hagrid, and Professor McGonagall, and Professor Dumbledore.

"There's not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin. You-Know-Who was one."

Monty knew just because everyone said something didn't mean it was true. Look at the Dursleys. They were telling everyone he went to a school for *incurably criminal boys*, that his parents were useless drunks.

Harry wasn't bad.

Monty had been hearing whispers, mostly from older students who were familiar with it, that the Patronus Charm could only be cast by those pure of heart. That dark witches and wizards would be devoured by maggots if they tried it, since the nature of the spell was contrary to everything they were. It was also supposed to be really hard, and it was amazing Harry had been able to do it.

Monty wanted to know *how* Harry had done it, but he couldn't just walk up to him and ask. Harry was a very private person, and he had a lot of secrets. It was sometimes hard to understand him, but after a month Monty came to realize that Harry was afraid of something.

His expression hardened as he stared at the dark ceiling. It had to be Sirius Black. Was Harry afraid of what Black would do to him if he found out they were friends? Harry had said that there were people with Death Eater parents who couldn't be friendly to him because of that. Because they believed what their parents did? Or because they would be punished if they didn't?

Monty rolled onto his side. He wished his parents were alive. He wished he wasn't Monty Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. Why couldn't he be normal like everyone else? It made everything so complicated.

He sat up suddenly. Harry was a prefect now. That meant he could do things other students couldn't. And Monty had his invisibility cloak. Maybe they could still meet? He'd have to get a message to Harry somehow. He was glad the dementor hadn't entered their compartment. They hadn't even seen it, just what it had done to Harry. But if it had...

Monty settled back down. Classes began in the morning. He needed to get some sleep.

Insults and Injuries

Chapter Summary

September 2nd, 1993

Chapter Notes

Hello!

I've decided to clarify some wolfy things. Canonically, and in this story, werewolves are not vulnerable to silver nor do they have any special abilities. Lupin's just a regular dude who turns into a regular wolf once a month, albeit a wolf with a taste for human flesh.

Lycanthropy is a chronic magical illness that doesn't have an upside.

And Penelope Clearwater wears boots with a kitten heel

Severus was ruminating over how his first class of the year would inevitably end in flames when Charity Burbage deposited her exuberant self into the seat next to him.

Burbage leaned in close and whispered, "Don't worry, I'll protect you from the big bad wolf." She finished off with a wink.

Severus snorted, then poured himself a second cup of coffee. No one had ever winked at him. They tended to avoid such fatuous gestures, unless they lacked self-preservation.

"Did you miss me?" she asked, batting her lashes at him. Her eyes were notable, the color of the sea after a storm, when the sun began breaking through the clouds.

"No," he said.

"Two long, arduous weeks without my majestic presence," she said, dumping sugar into her tea.

The Great Hall was beginning to fill up. Severus watched Harry lead the Slytherin first-years in, Jasmine Rookwood herding them from behind. He puzzled over the thick sheafs of paper the first-years carried, but dismissed it as irrelevant. He trusted Harry to look after them. How many times had the boy acted in defense of the entire school?

His middling mood plummeted when Lupin sat on Burbage's other side.

“Good morning,” Lupin said softly, smiling at the two of them. Severus had half expected the man to not show up at all. He recalled how much class Lupin had missed during their school days, but that had been before the Wolfsbane Potion was invented.

“Morning,” Burbage said cheerily, grinning at Lupin. Severus’ eye twitched, and he turned back to his own food.

“So, Severus,” Lupin said. “Harry Evans is one of your students?”

Severus methodically cut his sausage. “Yes.”

“That kid exemplifies some of the best traits of his house,” Burbage said. “I wish he was taking Muggle Studies. I’d love to see what he’d contribute as a muggleborn.”

“He’s a muggleborn?” Lupin asked, sounding surprised.

“Oh, there was a big scandal about that last year,” Burbage said casually. Severus glanced at her, and saw her layering scrambled eggs and bacon on her toast. “What with the basilisk and all.”

“What?” Lupin asked dumbly.

Severus ate his breakfast as Burbage relayed the Chamber of Secrets debacle to Lupin. Severus thought she was laying it on a bit thick, but Harry had been central to resolving the matter. Burbage even went into his development of a new potion, with her help.

Hearing about Lily’s death was the worst thing that had happened to him, but seeing his son petrified, how close Harry himself had come to death...

Severus looked up to check on his son, who had been joined at the Slytherin table by the Lovegood girl. Harry was fine.

In confirming his son’s continued existence, Severus had the misfortune of seeing Hagrid entering the hall, swinging a dead polecat around.

“What is that oaf doing?” he muttered as Hagrid stopped at the Gryffindor table to chat with Monty Potter and his friends.

Burbage looked over and laughed.

“I hope he isn’t bringing that to the table with him,” she said, turning to whisper excitedly to him. “Oh, god, he is!”

Severus poured a third cup of coffee. He could already feel a headache forming.

“Alright, you’ve got Transfiguration first,” Harry said, looking at Mephistopheles Thorne’s time table. “For first-years the classroom is on the first floor, not far from here actually.”

“Once you’ve finished with breakfast, we’ll collect your school things and walk you over there,” Jasmine said. “We’ll be escorting you to all of your classes the first few days, so once class is over don’t go running off. Wait for us.”

“You’ve got an owl,” Luna said quietly, pointing at an eagle owl making a beeline for him.

“I wonder who it could be from,” Harry said. It hadn’t come with the *Daily Prophet* as the rest of the mail usually did. Some kind of owl magic was at play there.

“Maybe it’s from the owl?” Luna suggested.

“It would be a bit hard to hold a quill,” Harry said as the owl swooped by and dropped the letter. Harry picked it up. “It’s from Charity. Captain Lament to you lot,” Harry said, looking around at the first-years. “Possibly the greatest gobstones captain this school has ever seen.”

“Harry’s the current captain of the house gobstones team,” Jasmine said, pointing out the badge he wore. The gobstone on it gave a helpful little squirt. “We’ve won the tournament for three consecutive years.”

“Here’s to another three,” Harry said, opening the letter.

Evans,

Word is England’s team is looking for new blood. I’ve got a job at the Official Gobstones Club at the Ministry. Right now they have me polishing stones, but it’s only a matter of time. Light a candle for Captain Prince on my behalf. And remember, you’ve got to hook them early.

May you find your own Carrow Twins.

Charity Lament

Slytherin Gobstones Captain 1990-1993

Slytherin Gobstones Champion

Gobstones Polisher Trainee

“I play gobstones,” Luna said. “I think it’s funny.”

Derek Wilkes cleared his throat. “I like gobstones too.”

“It’s alright,” Mephistopheles said. “But I think quidditch is better.”

“That’s a matter of taste,” Harry said, putting the letter away. “But consider this. First-years aren’t allowed on the team.”

“Monty was,” Luna piped up.

“First-years are typically not allowed on the team,” Harry amended. “I can assure you it isn’t the case for the Slytherin team.”

“We have standards,” Jasmine said, smiling widely at the first-years.

“But first-years *are* allowed on the gobstones team,” Harry said. “And there are other teams and clubs you can join. You’ll soon see sign up sheets and posters in the common room.”

Jasmine checked her watch. “We ought to leave now, Harry. They need to get their books.”

“Alright,” he said, standing up. “Will you be okay, Luna?”

Luna nodded, though her eyes were more distant than usual.

“Let’s go, firsties,” Jasmine said. “Professor McGonagall won’t tolerate tardiness. Besides Professor Snape, she is the most strict teacher.”

Harry watched Luna skip off towards Ginny Weasley, then led the first-years back to the common room.

“I heard Professor Snape favors Slytherin,” one of the girls, Andrea Gibbon, said.

“My parents said that too,” Penelope Padgett said. Rather, *Nel* Padgett.

“That’s a rumor,” Harry said. “He expects more out of Slytherins since he’s our head of house, and he isn’t shy about taking points or handing out detentions if you fool around in Potions.”

“Spoken like Snape’s favorite,” Jasmine whispered to him.

“Are people *still* saying that?” Harry asked, ignoring the looks the first-years were now giving him.

“He made you a prefect,” she said. “No one can remember another muggleborn Slytherin prefect.”

“You’re a mudblood?” one of the boys, Jason Mulciber, asked.

Harry exchanged a look with Jasmine.

“We use the term muggleborn here,” Harry said. “You’ll get points taken off for saying *mudblood*.”

Jason looked puzzled by this. “But that’s what they’re called.”

“It’s a bad word,” Andrea said. “That’s what my mum says.”

“We’re not supposed to use it,” Astoria Greengrass added.

Jason scowled. “But that’s what they’re called!”

“You can use it in private if you want,” Jasmine said, glancing at Harry. “But here at Hogwarts you’re expected to use the term *muggleborn*.”

“It’s like a bad nickname,” Harry said. “It’s sort of mean to call someone by a name they don’t like, right? And even if you don’t care about their feelings, you *should* care about getting in trouble for it. You don’t want to make us look bad by losing points over silly things.”

“I guess not,” Jason said mulishly, giving Harry a wary look. “You’re really a mud... muggleborn?”

“I am,” Harry said, smiling at him. What on earth had Jason been told about muggleborns? “I can tell you loads of things about the muggle world. Have you ever heard of dinosaurs?”

Monty’s eyelids felt heavy as he tried to interpret the leaves in Ron’s cup. It seemed like Professor Trelawney was really leaning into the psychic aesthetic, or *hippy-dippy nonsense* as his aunt and uncle would put it. There were scarves and crystals everywhere, and the lighting was reddish and dim. The room was filled with a soporific perfume, and was very hot and stuffy. He wanted some fresh air. He hated how confining it felt. He felt like his Inner Eye had conjunctivitis. Maybe mind-clearing exercises would help, if he could concentrate enough to do them in such an environment.

Monty shook his head, then looked into Ron’s teacup again.

“You’ve got a cross within a square,” Monty said, flipping through the extra book he had got. *Unfogging the Future* only had two pages on tea leaf symbols, and Harry had told him there were thousands. He had also said that, while some symbols had fairly consistent meanings, others were up to him to interpret. What meaning did he think they had? “You will experience some trials, but they can be averted. The cross is a bit wonky, so it’s uncertain. There’s a circle here, that indicates success. It’s on the side, sort of close to the handle, so it’s not that far off.”

Ron yawned. “My turn.”

Monty flipped through his book as Ron debated whether the animal in his cup was a hippopotamus or a sheep. Monty hoped it was a sheep; he knew from the placard at the zoo that hippos were aggressive.

Professor Trelawney came over and seized Monty's cup from Ron's hand. The room fell silent to listen to her interpret the Boy-Who-Lived's tea leaves.

Why did it have to be him?

"The falcon...my dear, you have a deadly enemy...the club, an attack...the skull, danger in your path..."

Monty sighed as Professor Trelawney turned the cup again. She gave a gasp, then screamed. Neville broke another cup. She dropped into the empty armchair next to Ron, clutching her chest.

"My dear boy, my poor dear boy. No, it is kinder not to say. No! Don't ask me!"

Monty got to his feet, as did everyone else.

"What is it, professor?" Dean asked. Monty took the opportunity to attempt to take back his teacup. Professor Trelawney had a deathgrip on it.

"My dear," Professor Trelawney said, looking at him with her magnified, watery eyes. "You have the Grim!"

Monty could feel everyone staring at him now.

"The grim," Monty said, frowning in thought. That was the dog on the cover of the book Harry had got. Some kind of death omen? "Are you sure it isn't just a dog?"

"I believe I know a grim when I see one!" Professor Trelawney said.

"Well," Monty began, thinking back on what Harry had told him about Divination.

"The future isn't set in stone. It's constantly in flux. The act of divining itself changes the future. If you ask a question and divine the answer, your future decisions will change based on that answer. If you ask the same question again, you'll get a different answer because the future has changed. Does that make sense? There's also the risk of finding answers because you are looking for a specific answer. Signs may be read incorrectly because of confirmation bias. You want the future to be a certain way, so, for example, if you read tea leaves you'll find the shapes you want to find."

"It's confirmation bias," Monty said. "There are all these other symbols that are bad, so it makes it seem like the dog is bad too. But it could just be a dog. And dogs mean—" Monty

picked up his book, flipping through to *dog* “—loyalty, friendship, and protection. So this could be saying that I’ve got a loyal friend to help me face all this danger. Right?”

Professor Trelawney blinked at him, her eyes watering anew, then looked down into his teacup again. “My dear boy...I see, yes, I see!”

“And the dog’s mouth is opening toward the skull,” Monty said, pointing into his cup. “So it will help me face the danger in my path.”

“Yes!” Professor Trelawney cried. “My dear boy, you have touched the Beyond!”

Monty looked at the clump of wet leaves again. He wasn’t entirely sure it *was* a dog. It did sort of look like a sheep. He was glad the professor hadn’t contradicted him, though. Monty had never gainsaid a teacher before, and was worried she would be upset with him. But Trelawney took to this new interpretation with a passion, and eventually people returned to their seats.

“Nice one,” Ron said, grinning at him. “She had me going there. My Uncle Bilius saw a grim, you know. He died twenty-four hours later!”

“I did see a dog over holiday,” Monty admitted. “But it was just a regular dog, and I’m obviously still alive.”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “What else has my cup got in it?”

Harry and Jasmine sat among the first-years during dinner. Harry knew that for most children raised in magical homes Hogwarts was their first experience with schooling. They had never had to get up for classes, or sit for hours in a room taking notes, or write essays. It was a lot to get used to.

Jason Mulciber hadn’t exactly warmed up to Harry, and obviously preferred Jasmine, but at least he wasn’t flinching away or looking at Harry like he was a feral animal. Harry supposed being a prefect helped. He got the impression Jason had grown up very isolated.

Harry had more to worry about than possibly indoctrinated first-years. Jasmine nudged him, then nodded to the entrance to the Great Hall. Astrid was storming in, Adrian and Cassius in her wake.

“She must have heard,” Harry said, looking to where Draco Malfoy’s friends were huddled together. The news had rapidly spread through Slytherin, and the rest of the school.

Draco Malfoy had been injured by a hippogriff.

Astrid threw herself into the seat next to him.

“Bloody idiot,” she growled.

“There are children present,” Jasmine said.

Astrid glared at the first-years, then breathed out. “Sorry. He is, though. Who in their right mind insults a hippogriff?”

“Is there a potion to induce dreams?” Cassius asked Harry, sitting across from him. “We’re starting dream interpretation this term.”

“The Sleepless Dream Draught,” Harry said, “though it has some serious side effects.”

“Get me some of that too,” Adrian said, looking at the first-years. “Fresh meat.”

“You are disgusting,” Jasmine said.

Adrian just laughed, then walked off to sit with Terence and Phoebe.

Astrid glared at her plate, then took out her wand and put a bubble of silence around her and Harry.

“What’s this for?” Harry asked, yawning to pop his ears.

“Malfoy’s being a real whiny bitch,” she said. “He only got a scratch, but he’s been moaning and crying all afternoon in the infirmary. And I’ve scheduled tryouts for this Saturday.”

“So he’ll miss tryouts,” Harry said. “Win-win.”

Astrid shook her head. “If Malfoy goes, so do the brooms. I asked Flint what the deal was. And if the brooms go, so does half the team.”

“Astrid, our friends make up half the team,” Harry pointed out. “They aren’t going to care about Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones. How many times has Terence called it overrated? Especially with the Firebolt out now.”

“I was hoping to get Crabbe and Goyle on as beaters, at least reserve,” Astrid said. “One of the reasons why the team is so strong is because we train up the lower years. I can’t just think about the next three years. I have to consider what the team will look like after I’m gone.”

“And if Malfoy isn’t on the team, he’ll tell them they can’t be,” Harry said. He glanced at the first-years, but they were too small. He still had nightmares about his brother’s jinxed broom, the cursed bludger.

“Exactly,” Astrid said bitterly. “I was going to talk to Malfoy after dinner, get some things straight with him.”

“Don’t bother,” Harry said. “Just do tryouts. Either he shows up or he doesn’t.”

Astrid glanced at the head table. “Snape’s hacked off.”

Harry looked at his dad, who did look annoyed. It could have been because of Lupin, though, who was chatting with Professor Burbage.

“Seriously,” Astrid said, turning back to him. “Who the fuck insults a hippogriff immediately after being told not to insult hippogriffs?”

“Is that what happened?” Harry asked. “The way Parkinson tells it, the hippogriff went wild.”

Astrid snorted. “No. Apparently Potter got to ride it around, then Malfoy strutted up to it and called it ugly.”

Harry stared blankly at her. “What?”

“Thick as shit,” Astrid said, shaking her head. She dispelled the silencing charm around them, and the noise of the Great Hall flooded back in. Food began appearing on the tables.

“Done with your little chat?” Jasmine asked.

“Yes,” Astrid said, smiling brightly at her.

“Is Draco going to be alright?” Astoria asked, looking worriedly at her sister, who was sitting in a group of third and fourth-years, speaking in hushed tones.

“Physically?” Harry said. “Yes.”

“We studied hippogriffs in third year,” Jasmine said. “Though not until much later in the term. They aren’t dark creatures, so any wounds from them are very easily healed.”

“Then why is he still in the hospital wing?” Astoria asked.

“I would like to know that too,” Astrid said, violently twisting the legs off of a roast chicken. “I would *love* to know the answer.”

Madam Pince took a cursory look at Harry’s permission form and waved him into the Restricted Section. He wondered if maybe he could have got permission directly from her, but was soon distracted by his now unfettered access to the Restricted Section. He knew it wasn’t the best year to lose himself in a new section of the library. He had the first-years to look after, his prefect duties, gobstones, and O.W.L.s for which Cassius was already devising revision schedules. Not to mention dementors at the gates and Sirius Black on the run. Possibly possessed by Voldemort, or aiding the Dark Lord in some new attempt on his brother’s life.

Harry paused at the entrance to one aisle, reaching a hand into his bag. He brushed against Lady Madeleine, who meowed sleepily, then found his project for the year.

He pulled Benjy out of his bag, giving the senescent toy a critical look. Toys like Benjy, other models that mimicked their real life counterparts, were intentionally designed to fail within a few years. If they lasted forever, no one would buy more or spend money to get theirs repaired. The toymakers needed to stay in business. Likewise, the sort of spells they used were closely guarded secrets, much like broommakers. Harry's options were to find out who had made Benjy and pay out the arse to get him running again, or reinvent the wheel.

To Harry, bringing Benjy back to artificial life seemed like a low stakes way to begin spellcrafting. Spells to mimic breathing, eating, blinking, walking, flying, to make all the tiny muscles move. What Benjy was actually made of was another avenue to explore. How Benjy's creator replicated a thestral's visibility to only those who had seen death was mind-boggling. Some kind of conditional spell tied to death? That was straying into black magic. Death magic.

Harry brushed Benjy's bony spine, fascinated. He couldn't wait to get started. Checking his watch, he walked deeper into the Restricted Section.

"Where do you three think you're going?"

Monty froze halfway through the entrance hall. He, along with Ron and Hermione, turned to see Harry walking out of the corridor that led to the library.

"We were going to visit Hagrid," Monty said. In remembering that Harry was a prefect, he had forgotten that prefects did things like take points and give people detention for breaking the rules. No one had told him he wasn't allowed to walk across the grounds, though, and it wasn't curfew yet.

"I see," Harry said, crossing his arms. "And did you forget the school is currently being guarded by dementors?"

"Sirius Black hasn't got past the dementors, has he?" Ron said insolently. That had been what Monty said to Hermione to get her to come along.

"He has, actually," Harry said. "Or have you forgotten he escaped from a prison island in the North Sea guarded by *hundreds* of dementors?"

Ron's mouth worked soundlessly as he failed to think of a retort.

"I knew this was a bad idea," Hermione huffed.

Harry checked his watch, then adjusted the bag slung over his shoulder. "My round doesn't start for about an hour. I can walk you three down there."

Monty didn't see they had much of a choice about it, and he'd prefer to go with Harry anyway. Hermione appeared relieved to have a prefect with them, but Ron had a sullen look

as they crossed the twilit grounds. When they reached Hagrid's hut, Harry stepped forward and rapped on the door. Hagrid grunted for them to enter.

Inside, Hagrid was in his shirtsleeves, his moleskin overcoat slung across the back of his chair. Fang's massive head was in his lap, drooling. A bucket-sized tankard was next to him, and Monty caught the scent of alcohol. He glanced at Harry, who was frowning in disapproval at Hagrid's state.

Hagrid lifted his head, blinking blearily at them before focusing on Harry. "Reckon this is it, then."

"What are you talking about, Hagrid?" Monty asked.

"Don't think they've had a teacher who only lasted a day," he said. He gave a loud grunt, then pushed himself upright. "Just give me a moment, I'll follow you back up to the castle."

"I believe there's been a misunderstanding," Harry said, sounding slightly amused. "Potter, Granger, and Weasley wanted to visit you. I'm only escorting them."

"Oh," Hagrid said, slumping on the table again. "Suppose it's only a matter of time, after Malfoy."

"It's his own fault," Harry said, crossing his arms again. "He disobeyed your instructions."

"That's right," Hermione said. "It's *Malfoy's* fault!"

"School governors reckon I started too big," Hagrid said. "Should've done flobberworms."

"We're witnesses," Monty said. "You told us that hippogriffs attack if you insult them."

"Yeah, we'll back you up," Ron added.

Hagrid began tearing up. Monty narrowed his eyes. Maybe Hagrid could use a distraction to take his mind off things.

"I think you've had enough to drink," Hermione said, reaching for the tankard.

"Actually," Monty said. "I wanted to ask you something, Hagrid."

Hermione pulled back, giving Monty a questioning look.

"What's that then?" Hagrid asked. "If it's about the next lesson—"

"It's about Sirius Black," Monty said. Hermione and Ron looked at him in surprise, while Harry placidly watched. "Did you know him?"

Hagrid's expression grew dark. "Thought I did. Used to visit me all the time with your dad. Thick as thieves, those two."

Hermione's eyes were darting between him and Hagrid, while Ron looked flummoxed by the information. Harry was silent, his expression unreadable.

"And Sirius Black betrayed him?" Monty pressed.

Hagrid slammed one massive fist on his table, making them all jump. "I met him that night! Right after I got you out of the rubble, he showed up on that flying motorbike of his, shaking and crying, saying I ought to hand you over because—"

Hagrid stopped abruptly, wiping his eyes. "Bleeding traitor. Don't you worry, Monty. He won't be getting you, not with them dementors around, and Professor Dumbledore."

"Right," Monty said shakily.

"I think we ought to go back to the castle," Harry said evenly. "It's getting late."

Monty nodded, distracted by what he had learned. Hagrid had found him? Then what? Dumped him on the Dursleys' doorstep? Sirius Black had shown up right after his parents were killed and wanted to take him? Why?

His head reeled as they walked back to the castle, Harry lighting the way with his wand. He was sure Hermione and Ron would be asking him questions as soon as Harry was out of earshot.

He used to have dreams of a flying motorbike. Who had been driving it?

La vie en rose

Chapter Summary

September 1993

Monty trailed Hermione into the Muggle Studies classroom, not knowing what to expect. He had signed up for the class on a whim. There was some merit in Hermione's idea of learning about muggles from a magical point-of-view. If anything, it would be entertaining to see what they got wrong. But the Muggle Studies professor was a muggleborn, so presumably she would know what she was talking about. And the way Percy described it made it sound like they learned about the magical world too, which was something Monty desperately needed. It had been pointed out to him, more than once, that his ignorance bordered on unforgivable. He wanted to belong.

One of the first things he had learned after being told he was a wizard was that Voldemort had killed his parents. That there had been an entire *war* his parents had fought in. He hadn't bothered to learn a thing about Voldemort, or the war, too dazzled by magic and quidditch, Chocolate Frogs and friends, his inescapable fame. It was worse that Snape of all people had pointed it out to him, during their strange truce next to a petrified Harry.

"You have stepped into a world you know nothing about, and from what I have seen you have made little to no effort in familiarizing yourself with it."

Hermione went directly to the first row of seats, bypassing their classmates who, by and large, were purebloods. Ernie Macmillan, Zacharias Smith, Hannah Abbott, Padma Patil, Anthony Goldstein, Blaise Zabini, Millicent Bulstrode—Monty almost did a double take, remembering the girl once had Hermione in a headlock—and Neville Longbottom, who was already sitting in the front row.

"Good afternoon, Neville," Hermione said, sitting next to him. Monty sat on her other side, but before he could greet Neville the professor walked in.

Monty had only seen Charity Burbage from a distance before. She hadn't caused as much of a stir as Gilderoy Lockhart. She wasn't a celebrity, was on the rather large side, and she taught the class where you didn't do any magic. It didn't make for compelling gossip. She did stand out for wearing muggle clothes, colorful dresses over which she wore various cloaks. Today she also had on a pointed, midnight blue hat with silver stars on it, and had attached a star to the end of her wand. It looked like what someone might wear to a fancy dress party if they were going as a witch.

"Gordon Bennett, we've got a good crop this year," Professor Burbage said, smiling at them. She had been levitating a stack of thin books, and deposited them on her desk.

“Who’s Gorden Bennett?” Neville whispered to Hermione.

“It’s just a muggle saying,” Professor Burbage said, startling Neville so badly he nearly fell out of his seat. Monty snorted. “Sort of like how you might say *Merlin*. Now, let’s introduce ourselves. My name is Charity Burbage. I’ve got all my O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s, and I’ve done muggle schooling.”

Hermione almost fell out of her seat as well. Monty glanced at her, and saw she was near euphoric at the thought of doing even more schooling.

“We’ll be talking about what sorts of things muggle children learn in school later on in the term,” Professor Burbage continued. “Now, let’s start with the speccy one. Tell me your name and what you hope to learn by taking this class.”

Monty was a little taken aback, but said, “I’m Monty Potter. I heard that you also teach about magical culture?”

Professor Burbage nodded. “I do. There will be a lot of comparing the muggle world to the magical world in this class. Curly, you’re next.”

“My name is Hermione Granger,” Hermione said regally. “And I’d like to learn about muggles from a wizarding perspective.”

“Well, I’m a witch,” Professor Burbage said apologetically, “and a muggleborn, but I’ll do my best. You, Pet Shop boy!”

“Um, Neville Longbottom?”

Monty sat quietly as the rest of the class introduced themselves. He was unsurprised most of them were there to learn more about muggles, even the Slytherins. He hadn’t expected to see any Slytherins at all. They came off as indifferent to the muggle world, if not outright hostile.

“Nice to meet you all,” Professor Burbage said. “Now, I’d like for everyone to take out their copies of *The Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle*, the first issue.”

As Monty pulled the comic out of his bag, Hermione stuck her hand in the air.

“Yes, Miss Granger?”

“Professor, why are we reading comic books?” Hermione asked.

“Have you read it already?” Professor Burbage asked.

“I did,” Hermione said.

“What stood out to you?”

Hermione frowned, flipping through her own copy. “Well, they’ve got a lot of things wrong. On the first page they have him driving on the wrong side of the road.”

“And what does that tell us?” Professor Burbage asked. “Mr. Potter, what do you think?”

“That there are a lot of misconceptions?” Monty suggested.

Professor Burbage grinned at him. “Exactly. Most of you raised in magical households will have learned things about muggles which, the majority of the time, are completely wrong. And this is a very popular comic among magical children. Can you imagine basing your entire idea of muggles on this, Miss Granger?”

Hermione looked appalled. “Absolutely not! He...he sits on the toilet the wrong way, uses all the wrong utensils, can’t read or write. It makes it seem like muggles are stupid.”

“But it’s supposed to be funny,” Zacharias Smith said from behind them. “It’s not meant to be educational.”

“So how do you use a telephone?” Professor Burbage asked.

Monty turned around to look at Smith, curious what his answer would be.

“You shout into it, right?” he said.

Monty turned quickly back around to hide his laughter. So that’s where Ron had got the idea. A comic book.

Professor Burbage looked like she wanted to laugh too, but she only shook her head. “If you did that, the person you rang would start shouting back, or hang up on you. That means ending the telephone call. So,” she said, looking at Hermione, “that’s why we are starting with comic books. We’ll be reading some comparative muggle literature so we learn how they think about magic. There is also a practical portion to this course.”

Professor Burbage took her wand out and waved it at the board behind her. The chalk rose into the air and began writing. “One of the biggest struggles all magical peoples have in the muggle world is fitting in. So we’ll be learning how to navigate the muggle world, at least in Britain. The money they use, transportation, entertainment, food, clothing—that’s a big one—technology, terminology, and so on. The best way to get used to the muggle world is to actually be *in* the muggle world, but given current events I think a field trip is off the plate this year. Yes, Mr. Zabini?”

“You’d actually take us into the muggle world?” Zabini asked. “Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Not particularly,” Professor Burbage said. “Your muggleborn classmates have survived it. There *are* dangerous muggles, in the same way there are dangerous witches and wizards, but we will talk about that when the time comes. Alright, let’s start with the cover, shall we?”

Monty thought his first Muggle Studies class was really easy, but also really fun. He and Hermione knew what was wrong right away, and while Hermione was eager to give the answers, Professor Burbage had her read a muggle newspaper she had produced from thin air. Monty got a copy too. He hadn’t paid any attention to the muggle world since he had started

Hogwarts, only vicariously learning things from whatever the Dursleys had on the television. He was startled to learn there had been several bombings in London that year.

The rest of class was spent discussing what *The Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle* had got wrong, and what it had got right.

“Now, as I’ve said, we will be reading muggle literature as well,” Professor Burbage said. She waved her wand, and the books on her desk rose, a copy floating over to each of them. “This is your reading for the week. *Travel Light*, by Naomi Mitchison. She’s a muggle author. Muggles have many different ideas of what magic looks like. What did Mitchison get right? What did she get wrong? Your homework is to write ten questions you have about muggles or, alternatively, about the magical world. I would also like you to think about this,” Professor Burbage said, looking at them all intently. “There is a key difference between muggles and us, and it’s not magic.”

“It’s not?” Hannah Abbott asked.

“It’s not,” Professor Burbage said firmly. “Muggles don’t know we exist, but we know muggles exist. So what’s our excuse for getting things wrong?”

Percy led the other prefects to the Great Hall, Penelope at his side. There hadn’t been much to go over for their second meeting of the year, only a few days into the term. The dementors and the hippogriff incident were at the forefront of everyone’s minds. The Slytherin first-years had been seen with maps of the castle, created by Jasmine Rookwood, who easily made copies for the other fifth-year prefects to hand out. And now they were going to begin their lessons on the Patronus Charm.

The tables in the Great Hall had been moved against the walls to give them space to practice. Percy was surprised to see the headmaster and Professor Snape waiting for them.

“Good evening, professors,” he said.

Professor Dumbledore smiled around at them. “Good evening Percy, Miss Clearwater. Don’t mind us. Severus and I are merely curious what you all are up to.”

Percy nodded, turning to face the prefects. “Gather round, everyone. Evans here will be instructing us on how to cast the Patronus Charm. Evans?”

Harry had been looking at Professor Snape, but immediately focused on him. “Right. Let’s spread out first. There’s plenty of space, and we don’t want to accidentally cast spells at each other. The area of effect can be quite large.”

Percy joined the ragged line, watching Harry curiously. He had his back to the professors. Percy was impressed how composed he was, being made to not only perform the Patronus

Charm in front of his head of house and the headmaster, but to teach it to others. Harry looked completely unbothered.

“I’ll start by explaining some of the theory on the Patronus Charm,” Harry said, crossing his arms in a way reminiscent of Professor Snape giving a lecture. “The theory is not actually well understood, which is odd since the Patronus Charm is an ancient spell, one of the oldest recorded. It predates its modern incantation by several centuries, at least. Like many types of magic, some theorists postulate that the Patronus Charm was initially a manifestation of accidental magic, an inadvertent response to the presence of a dementor, or possibly a lethifold. Given these two creatures are found on different continents, there is also a possibility of simultaneous invention.”

“Should we be taking notes?” Alicia Spinnet asked, earning a few laughs.

Harry smiled at her. “If you want. It’s important to understand what a patronus is, otherwise I doubt you’ll be successful in casting it. Most texts will say that the Patronus Charm is conjured by a happy memory, that the strength of that memory—the amount of the happiness—correlates to how powerful the patronus is.”

“Is that not the case?” Penelope asked.

Harry looked at her. “For a non-corporeal patronus, it would be enough. But the spell draws on something more vital than a happy memory. The difficulty is in identifying what that is. A fully corporeal patronus is antithetical to a dementor’s existence. It is formed of the things a dementor cannot have, and lacks the things it does. Hope, trust, the desire to survive, the strength to continue.” Harry shook his head. “I think I’ve complicated matters enough. To begin with, think of a happy memory.”

Harry took out his wand, then closed his eyes. After a moment they snapped open, and he moved his wand in a spiral. “*Expecto patronum.*”

A silver shield flowed out of his wand, almost blinding in its intensity. There were a few gasps of relief. Percy felt it too. He was lighter somehow, warmer. It was easier to breathe. He hadn’t even realized the dementors were affecting them.

After a few moments, the shield faded away.

“What did you think of?” Alicia asked.

Harry smiled at her. “Getting my braces taken off. That’s a very personal question, by the way. Luckily, I anticipated someone asking that, and chose a trivial sort of happiness. That’s why the spell was so weak.”

“That was weak?” someone muttered.

“Now you’ve seen the wand movement, and know the incantation,” Harry said. “Focus on a happy memory. Really focus on it, make it the only thing you can think about. It’s not so much the memory that matters, but what you felt. Ask yourself, ‘Have I been happier?’ Close your eyes, it helps to concentrate.”

Percy closed his eyes, feeling oddly vulnerable. A happy memory. Getting his Hogwarts letter. Learning he was a prefect. Learning he was Head Boy. Seeing his mother smile. Someone giving him muggle chocolates for Christmas.

He blushed, ashamed by his last thought. Becoming Head Boy. It was recent, it was a major accomplishment. It *did* make him happy.

“Once you’ve found the memory,” he heard Harry say, “attempt to cast the spell. Don’t expect immediate success. It takes a lot of time. I’ll come around and correct your stances.”

Percy opened his eyes, and saw Harry pacing back and forth, watching them.

“How long did it take you?” Cedric Diggory asked. Percy had forgotten he was there, and was annoyed by the reminder.

Harry stopped walking, an almost bashful expression crossing his face. “Two weeks.”

Harry sat in the stands of the quidditch pitch, fiddling with the wireless Percy had given him. It picked up both magical and muggle stations as promised, but it was too early for anything good to be on. Astrid was on the pitch, quidditch hopefuls spread out before her. Draco had shown up late, his arm in a sling.

Harry shook his head and kept searching for a station. It wasn’t Cedric’s fault, not really. If Dumbledore hadn’t been there, Harry would have happily lied about how long it had taken him to conjure a corporeal patronus. But Dumbledore was a Legilimens. He would have heard the lie, and Harry hadn’t had time to compose himself.

Two weeks. He had seen the looks of surprise, shock, doubt, even awe in a few cases. The Patronus Charm was an almost impossibly difficult spell. A fifteen-year-old shouldn’t have been able to master it in such a short period of time. Harry wasn’t even certain he *had* mastered it. In the moment, a dementor so close to Monty, failure was not an option. He had to cast a patronus, and so he did.

Explaining that was not an option.

They had wanted to see his patronus, of course. He could almost feel the pressure of the headmaster’s interest in that. Harry hadn’t wanted to show them. It was personal. It was private. The patronus was meant to represent the soul. The lobster of his soul.

“Pour commencer ce matin...”

Harry’s hand stilled on the dial. It seemed the range on the wireless was quite broad.

“...une chanson classique d’Édith Piaf...”

He sighed as the horns and strings came in. Phoebe and Jasmine had decided to sit out the drama, neither wanting to wake up so early just to watch Astrid yell at people.

“Des yeux qui font baisser les miens...”

“You can’t play?” Astrid said, walking up to Draco. “Potter caught the snitch after his arm had been *shattered* by a bludger, and you’re telling me you can’t play?”

“Un rire qui se perd sur sa bouche...”

Draco glared back at her defiantly, his face burning red. “Father says—”

“I don’t give a bloody *fuck* what your father says,” Astrid snapped.

“How dare you! I was attacked by a hippogriff!”

“Tough shit, Malfoy,” Astrid said. Draco was nearly her height, but she had a presence he lacked. “*I’m* the captain. We’re playing. If you don’t like it, take your brooms and get off my bloody team!”

“Je vois la vie en rose...”

Harry watched Lucian Bole and Peregrine Derrick exchange looks. He was worried they might resent Astrid for being captain over either of them. They were both sixth-years, and had been on the team longer. So had Graham Montague, but he was gleefully watching the proceedings. Harry doubted Graham cared about which broom he had. He just wanted to play quidditch. To Harry, it seemed like Draco’s main concern was social capital. He certainly hadn’t done the Slytherin team any favors, with neither his expensive brooms nor his mediocre seeker skills

“Les ennuis, les chagrins, s’effacent...”

It wasn’t just the current team on the pitch. Other students had shown up to try out. Millicent Bulstrode, Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle were all trying out for beater. Vince had shot him a guilty look, but Harry didn’t mind if he wanted to play quidditch with his friends. Not everyone was suited to the gobstones life.

Miles Bletchley was there too, though the chances of him unseating Astrid as keeper were laughable. He would still make a good reserve player. Then, in a complete upset, there were Flora and Hestia Carrow, the less infamous Carrow Twins who had defied Captain Lament’s attempts at building the perfect gobstones team. Harry had never seen either play gobstones in their three years at Hogwarts.

“Heureux, heureux à mourir...”

Harry reclined on the cold bench, watching Draco snatch his broom out of Vince’s hands, rising unsteadily into the air.

He got his wand out. It wouldn’t look good for Astrid if Draco broke his neck.

Percy knelt over the cauldron he had set up in the bathroom of his dormitory. He hadn't expected an opportunity to come so soon, but Oliver had caught wind of the Slytherin's early morning practice and rallied the Gryffindor team, not wanting to fall behind before the season even began.

His tools and ingredients were spread out around him, some from his own potions kit, some taken from Professor Snape's stores. His plan had come together too late from him to make a discreet purchase in Knockturn Alley, where people who asked too many questions ended up cursed. At best.

Grinding the pearls into dust was meditative. It gave him too much time to think.

Percy had seen the reluctant set of Harry's shoulders when asked to conjure a corporeal patronus. He had felt guilty when Harry ultimately acceded to their demands. Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape were both there, either of them could have performed the spell. But they had wanted to see Harry, the boy who claimed to have mastered it in two weeks.

Harry had closed his eyes, his face softening into a beatific peace. One could almost feel the magic gathering around him, his hair and robes rippling with the force of it. He was breathtaking.

And then he cast the spell.

"Expecto patronum!"

A glorious, ethereal light burst from Harry's wand, filling the Great Hall with its beauty and warmth. With Harry's resplendent magic, in its purest form.

Percy had been transfixed.

He barely registered the shape it had taken—a lobster, he knew, something he had puzzled over hours later—so captivated he had been.

The sound of Penelope clapping had brought him crashing down to reality.

Percy stopped pulverizing the pearls, shutting his eyes and heart against the memory. After a moment, he checked on the potion then began crushing the pearls again.

He said the right things.

Percy sifted the pearl dust into the cauldron, watched the potion turn a shade of luminous, shimmering rose.

He did the right things.

Percy picked up the heart-shaped locket bearing a curl of Penelope's soft, golden hair. She took excellent care of it.

He just needed to feel the right things.

Percy removed a single strand of Penelope's hair and dropped it into the cauldron.

Ridiculous

Chapter Summary

September 1993

For the first time in weeks, Sirius Black was not on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*.

Astrid glared so fiercely at the paper in her hands it started to catch on fire. The picture of Draco Malfoy, taken in the infirmary while he moaned over his bandaged arm, suddenly jumped out of bed and ran out of frame.

Harry turned to his own paper, narrowing his eyes at the article.

Unhinged Hippogriff at Hogwarts!

Ministry officials from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures have been dispatched to Hogwarts in the wake of a heinous assault on one of its students. Draco Malfoy, a third-year at Hogwarts, was attacked by what his classmates describe as an out-of-control, feral hippogriff during his first Care of Magical Creatures class.

Amos Diggory, head of the Beast Division, has taken the lead on the investigation.

“We will get to the bottom of this,” says Diggory. “There are permits required for the stabling of hippogriffs, so the first step is making sure the herd at Hogwarts has all the right forms.”

Lucius Malfoy, member of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, has yet to comment on the violent assault of his son. He and his wife have asked to be left in peace while their only child recovers from his grievous injury.

Harry set the paper down and picked up his coffee. He closed his eyes as he took a sip. It was dark and rich. It tasted like home.

After Astrid had kicked Draco down to reserve seeker, he had returned to the hospital wing for the remainder of the weekend and had yet to make an appearance. Everyone knew he was perfectly fine, and yet he persisted in his deception. Draco's behavior had been completely idiotic, his injury entirely his fault. It reminded Harry of football players taking pratfalls,

flailing around on the grass, clutching their legs while everyone else rolled their eyes at their theatrics.

Of course Lucius Malfoy was taking advantage of his son's idiocy. Hagrid had been appointed by Dumbledore. Attacking him would remove one of Dumbledore's most steadfast allies, and leave the position open for the Board to fill. Perhaps with someone who would teach them that centaurs were talking horses and that goblins should stay in their rightful place, serving witches and wizards.

Harry looked at the Hufflepuff table, where Cedric was chatting happily with the rest of his quidditch team. He looked away again before Cedric could notice him.

"Do you remember what your first class is today?" Harry asked Derek, who blanched then nodded meekly.

"Potions," he said.

"Alright," Harry said, looking at the other first-years. "The dungeons are one of the more difficult areas of the castle to navigate. As you know from the map Jasmine has drawn, there are only a few areas regularly traversed. We can explore them when you have a free period."

After he and Jasmine led the first-years to the Potions classroom, picking up a few stray Gryffindors along the way, they headed up to their first Defense class of the year.

"Have you heard anything about Lupin?" Jasmine asked as they walked.

"People seem to like him so far," Harry said. "He sounds competent."

"That's the nicest thing I've heard you say about someone," Jasmine said, smiling at him. "Though I imagine your standard of competence is somewhat unrealistic."

"If these dunderheads collapse under the weight of my rather meager expectations, that is a weakness of their character and no fault of my own."

Jasmine guffawed and Harry grinned at her.

"Your impression is spot on," she said, wiping her eyes. "You even sound like him a little!"

Harry kept grinning, though his blood pulsed with a warning. Was he picking up too many of his dad's mannerisms? Was he starting to look more like him?

By the time they arrived at the Defense classroom, everyone else had already found seats and Professor Lupin was busy writing on the board. Harry sat down next to Astrid, who had procured a new *Daily Prophet* from somewhere and was busy defacing the photograph of Draco. Harry picked up a leaflet that had been placed on his desk, surprised to see it had an outline of all the topics they were covering, their readings, and their assignments.

"Good morning, everyone," Lupin said, turning around and dusting chalk from his hands. "My name is Remus Lupin, I'll be your Defense instructor this year. There is some

housekeeping before we get started on the material. Have you each got a copy of the syllabus?"

Harry nodded, still looking through it. That was what annoyed him most about school, not knowing what he needed to do well ahead of time. The professors taught the same classes every year, why was it so difficult to tell them what all the reading was? He could get it all done at once instead of dragging it out, then spend his time on other things.

"The headmaster has requested everyone in fifth-year and up be given some lessons on the Patronus Charm," Lupin said. Harry looked up at him, and Lupin gave him a faint smile. "Now, this is not in the curriculum, but given the presence of dementors we've agreed it's in your best interest to at least get your started on learning this spell. We won't devote too much time to it, as you are expected to be practicing the spells you learn in class on your own, but we will get in some practice at the end of each lesson."

Harry winced as he felt Lady Madeleine claw her way onto his lap, having woken from her nap in his bag. She put her little paws on the desk and looked at Lupin. Lupin paused in his speech to stare back at her.

"Sorry, professor," Harry said, blushing. He lifted his kitten up and put her firmly in his lap.

Lupin shook his head fondly. "As I was saying, I would like to spend this first lesson reviewing the concepts you should have been learning during your first four years here. These topics will inevitably be on your O.W.L. exam. Beginning with first year, we have the identification of ghouls, ghosts, and poltergeists. Can someone tell me what distinguishes these three entities? Yes, Mr. Warrington?"

Madam Pomfrey frowned as she pressed her hand to Percy's clammy forehead.

"Did you eat or drink anything unusual?" she asked, feeling around his stomach.

"No," Percy said, taking slow, even breaths, trying to calm his racing heart. It was the nausea that had tipped him off. Starting off with a full dose had been a mistake. He had found it hard to concentrate on his school work, his thoughts consumed with Penelope Clearwater. He needed to recalculate the dosage, strike the right balance. He needed to remain lucid and functional.

Madam Pomfrey huffed then stood back. "Try casting a spell."

Percy got out his wand and did the first spell that came to mind, his thoughts still on Penelope Clearwater. "*Expecto patronum.*"

Nothing happened.

Madam Pomfrey tutted. "Don't overexert yourself, just something small."

Percy nodded. "*Lumos.*"

"Keep that up for a while," she said, walking back to her office. "I need to send a sample of the litorin we've got to Professor Snape. If they tampered with it..."

Percy sat on the hospital bed, his lit wand on his lap. A smaller dose. Or maybe a more mild potion. He had to stay focused. On school. On Penelope Clearwater.

"I would hate to see a promising boy like that become little more than a catamite."

Percy summoned the nearest receptacle, an empty vase, and vomited into it.

A smaller dosage. Could he mix it with Wit-Sharpening Potion? He would have to research the interactions...

"One of the potential side effects is losing the ability to dream," Harry said.

After a week of school, he and Jasmine were letting the first-years find their own way to class for the first time. As such, he was sitting with his friends and trying to talk Cassius out of drugging himself for divination purposes.

"It was a potion designed for torture, to keep people from sleeping at all. It's not for recreational use."

Cassius raised an eyebrow.

"I'm telling you," Jasmine said. "A sachet of lavender and meadowsweet."

"What about jasmine?" Adrian asked.

Jasmine laughed. "You couldn't afford it."

"Who said anything about paying?"

"Oh, look, the mail's here," Astrid said drily.

Harry snatched his *Daily Prophet* out of the air and was greeted with a headline that made his blood run cold.

Sirius Black Sighted! Muggle Authorities On High Alert!

Harry quickly unrolled the paper, the words almost blurring as he scanned the article.

“A muggle woman phoned their hotline,” Harry said, setting the paper down with a calm he didn’t feel. He picked up his coffee. The small comfort this morning ritual offered was absent. “Not too far from Hogsmeade. He’s been on the run for almost two months, and the first sighting was by an elderly muggle woman. If this doesn’t highlight how incompetent our government is, I don’t know what does.”

Severus glared at the familiar image of Sirius Black, empty eyes staring out of his filthy face.

“Oh, that isn’t good,” Burbage said, setting down her tea.

“I believe that is what is known as an understatement,” Severus said.

On Burbage’s other side, Lupin had gone stiff as a board. Severus looked quickly away from him, from that expression of pain, guilt, anger, grief. He didn’t need to see it on someone else. He was all too familiar with it.

“It doesn’t take this long to travel from the northern coast to here,” Burbage said. “Not even on foot. What has he been doing all this time?”

“It was never a certainty he was coming here,” Severus said, flipping the paper so he didn’t have to look at Black anymore. He did know that it was highly probable Black was after Potter. The deranged man had been muttering *He’s at Hogwarts* over and over again before his breakout.

“At least it will give the dementors something to do,” Hagrid said darkly. “Can’t even go for a pint these days without them breathing all over you.”

Hagrid had been maudlin, and thus more unbearable, since Malfoy had provoked that hippogriff. Between the circus of the quidditch team, insults to hippogriffs, Lucius Malfoy putting his son’s life at risk, and Harry’s dislike of the boy, Draco Malfoy was quickly becoming Severus’ least favorite student.

Over the course of this rather dismal breakfast, Severus set aside the matter of Sirius Black. There was no use speculating. If the man put so much as a toe on the grounds he was as good as dead.

After breakfast, Severus walked to the third-years’ potions classroom, locking the door behind him so he could prepare in peace. The students were making the Shrinking Solution that day. As always, he hoped they would apply the techniques learned from previous potions to this new challenge and, as always, he expected to be deeply disappointed.

Once it was time to begin, he unlocked the door and the students filed in, finding their own stations. He despaired of any of them reaching N.E.W.T. level. Potter could, if he wasn’t

being dragged down by Weasley. He was surprised that, so far, Potter was doing much better than in his first two years. He suspected Harry was behind it. Maybe one of them would inherit their mother's talent in the field.

Things were progressing as smoothly as possible, given he had Crabbe, Goyle, Longbottom, and Finnigan in his class, until a disturbance an hour into their double period. Draco Malfoy swaggered in, his arm still in that ridiculous and wholly unnecessary sling.

"How is it, Draco?" Parkinson asked, turning away from her potion while it threatened to boil over.

"You're late, Malfoy," he said, taking the wind out of the boy's sails. "Ten points from Slytherin. I doubt you'll have time to complete the potion from scratch, so join one of your classmates and assist them."

Malfoy gaped at him.

"Are you incapable of choosing?" he said. "I'm sure Goyle could use some help. Join him at his cauldron and start working."

Severus turned away from Malfoy, walking among the other students as they continued to brew. He paused at Longbottom's cauldron, over which the boy was sweating heavily.

"Why is this potion orange?" he asked calmly.

"I...I..." Longbottom stammered. He began shaking.

Severus closed his eyes. "Explain what you did, from the beginning, so we may identify where you went wrong. What was the first step, Longbottom?"

He stood patiently as Longbottom gave a stuttered explanation. Severus knew what was wrong. He had seen every variation of this botched potion over the years. Longbottom had used one too many rat spleens, and added far too much leech juice. It wasn't impossible to fix, and Longbottom with his herbology knowledge should have been capable of it on his own. Operative word being *should*.

"That is correct, Longbottom," Severus said, noting how the boy was nearly faint with relief. What had been done to this child to make him so febrile? "Granger, work with Longbottom on correcting his potion."

"Yes, professor," Granger said eagerly. Always looking for a chance to show off, that girl.

Shaking his head, Severus moved on. Weasley had done a passable job chopping his daisy roots. A glance into Potter's cauldron told him the boy was doing fine, even better than Granger.

He walked back to his desk, hoping disaster had been averted. Then Finnigan spoke up.

"Hey, Monty," Finnigan said, stealing the boy's scales. Amazingly, Potter had no reaction to this. "Have you heard? *Daily Prophet* this morning—"

“I’ve heard,” Potter said shortly. “I need to focus on this. We can talk after class.”

Finnigan pulled back, surprised. “Ah, grand.”

Severus smirked, then walked over to his Slytherins. Malfoy was butchering Goyle’s caterpillar with a sullen look. It was comparable to what Goyle would have done on his own, so Severus passed by without comment.

Monty needed to talk to Harry.

He’d managed to slip away from Ron and Hermione to stop by the Owlery, using one of the school owls to send a note. At dinner, he was surprised to find Harry’s kitten pawing at his leg, a note tied around her neck. She was getting bigger and was able to walk in a straight line, slipping between the legs of students to make her way back to Harry.

He rubbed his arms anxiously as he waited. The note had told him to go to the *Daily Prophet* archive, and he’d had to ask Madam Pince where it was. Deep beneath the main floor of the library, apparently. Monty had never even known such a place existed. Hermione would lose her mind, but he had no intention of telling her about it.

Monty spun around as the door opened, exhaling in relief when he saw it was Harry.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked, looking at him with concern.

“We did boggarts in Defense today,” Monty said as Harry closed the door firmly behind him. He cast a few spells too, his lips barely moving as he did. Monty recognized them as locking charms, and silencing charms. He thought they might be a speciality of Harry’s.

“Did Professor Lupin find an actual boggart for you?” Harry asked. He pulled out a seat for himself and sat down. Monty quickly sat across from him. “I tried to get...my third-year professor to do that, but he shot the idea down.”

“He did,” Monty said. “Everyone got a turn, but when it came to me, Professor Lupin ran in front of me.”

“Did he,” Harry said, frowning. “What was his boggart?”

“I don’t know,” Monty said. “Some kind of ball I think.”

Harry nodded. “Are you upset you didn’t get a chance?”

“Sort of,” Monty said. “Why did he stop me from even trying?”

“I think that’s obvious,” Harry said. “After the war, most people had Voldemort as their boggart. Imagine seeing him coming out of your wardrobe.”

“But I don’t even know what he looks like,” Monty said.

“The boggart basically reads your mind to find your deepest fear,” Harry said. “Even if you can’t actively remember, the memory may still exist for the boggart to use against you. And even if it wasn’t Voldemort, there are other fears you might not want to share with everyone. Things that are private. Boggarts can speak, you know.”

Harry had a distant look in his eyes.

“Have you seen a boggart?” Monty asked.

“Yes,” Harry said. “It was one of the worst things I have seen.” He closed his eyes briefly, then looked at Monty. “You and I have more complex fears than most people our ages. I think Professor Lupin was trying to be nice.”

“But if I don’t practice now, how am I supposed to be ready when I run into a boggart later?”

Harry smiled, though it looked kind of sad. “That was exactly my reasoning. I’ve wondered if maybe finding that boggart was a set up...” He shook his head. “The solution is fairly simple. You could ask Professor Lupin if you can try in private.”

“Alright,” Monty said. “I’ll do that.”

“So,” Harry said, leaning forward. “How was your first week back?”

Monty shrugged. He loved being back at Hogwarts, but the news that morning had unsettled him. Sirius Black sighted, not far from Hogsmeade. “It’s alright, I guess. What about you?”

“Being a prefect is easier than I thought,” Harry said. “Though I’ve got a bunch of first-years to worry about. None of them have ever been to school before, so it takes some getting used to.”

Monty nodded. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to be a prefect. It seemed more frustrating than anything, at least based on how Percy acted.

“How’s Care been since the hippogriff thing?” Harry asked. “Any more exciting classes?”

“No,” Monty said. “Hagrid’s got us feeding flobberworms.”

Harry blinked at him, then leaned back and looked at the ceiling. “There are thousands of creatures living in the Black Lake and the Forbidden Forest. You could throw a rock and hit something more interesting than a flobberworm.” He sighed, then sat up again. “I’ll talk to someone about it. That isn’t okay.”

“He might move on soon,” Monty said, though deep down he doubted it. Hagrid had lost all of his confidence. He’d really taken the suggestion to use flobberworms to heart.

Harry snorted, obviously thinking along the same lines. “Don’t worry about it.” He checked his watch. “I’ve got prefect rounds soon. Why don’t you see if Professor Lupin’s in his office? You might be able to face a boggart before curfew.”

Monty hesitated. "Okay. Um, I was wondering..."

"Yeah?"

"Would you have time to keep teaching me?" he asked in a rush.

Harry raised an eyebrow, then reached for something in his bag. It was a roll of parchment, and Lady Madeleine came out with it.

"Clingy," Harry said, detaching her. He took out his wand and pointed it at the scroll.

"*Geminio*."

A second scroll popped into existence, and Harry passed it to him.

"That's my prefect rounds schedule," he said. "I could make some time if you catch me after my shift is over."

Monty opened the scroll. "But that would be after curfew."

Harry smirked. "I'm sure you'll manage."

"Come in."

Monty stepped into the Defense professor's office, happy to see all the pictures of Lockhart were gone for good. Destroyed by a niffler, if the rumors were true.

"Monty, how are you?" Professor Lupin asked. In the dim candlelight, he looked very tired.

"I was wondering if I could try the boggart in private?" Monty asked.

Lupin's eyebrows rose. "Ah. I'm sorry you didn't get a chance in class."

"I know it was because you thought it might be Voldemort," Monty said.

Lupin looked chagrined. "Was it that obvious?"

Monty nodded, even though it was Harry who had told him.

Lupin sighed. "Are you still interested in trying?"

"I am," Monty said.

"Alright," Lupin said, standing up. "It's still in the staffroom. There's some time before curfew."

Monty walked with Lupin down to the staffroom. They passed by Luna on the grand staircase, who was being accompanied by a harried Penelope Clearwater. Luna waved happily at him as she pranced up the stairs. Monty was glad to see she was getting back to her normal self, though he wondered if it was just an act. Happiness was harder to feel with dementors around.

Lupin opened the door to the staffroom, but hesitated before entering. "Severus, I didn't expect to see you here again."

Monty looked around Lupin to see a very put upon Professor Snape, sitting in an armchair, drinking coffee and reading a book.

"It is an inevitability given we work in the same place," Snape said flatly.

"I suppose it is," Lupin said. "Monty here wanted a chance at the boggart."

"By all means," Snape said, waving at the wardrobe. "Pretend I'm not here. Merlin knows I do."

Lupin chuckled, then gestured for Monty to enter, shutting the door behind him. Monty looked worriedly at Snape, but Snape only raised an eyebrow and went back to his reading. They had run into Snape during class. At that time, Snape had questioned Lupin about confronting a boggart in a group at all. After having spoken to Harry, Monty realized that perhaps it was a valid concern, despite the advantage facing a boggart in a group offered. What if something really horrible had happened to someone? Would they want all of their classmates seeing it?

"Alright," Lupin said, standing beside the wardrobe. "Remember, the spell is *riddikulus*. The goal is to transform your fear into something you can laugh at. If it *is* Lord Voldemort, what would make him funny?"

Monty struggled to think of something as he took out his wand. Harry had told him what happened with Quirrell. "If he gets stuck as a wraith forever?"

Snape started coughing, and Monty turned around to see him spelling spilt coffee off of his robes.

"A wraith?" Lupin said. "I suppose that works. Are you ready?"

Monty gripped his wand firmly and nodded.

"One, two, three!"

Lupin opened the wardrobe.

Monty stared into the darkness.

He squinted against a flash of green light. There was something familiar about the color.

A body fell out and lay still on the floor. Monty stared at Harry's ghostly pale face, his vacant eyes, the wand rolling out of his slack hand.

Harry was dead.

Monty's mind went blank. He started shaking.

Lupin looked stunned, but recovered. "Monty! The spell!"

"Ri—"

Sirius Black stepped out of the wardrobe, a manic light in his eyes. He smiled at Harry's corpse, then began laughing. He pointed his wand at Monty.

"Riddiku—"

A violent red light sped past Monty and struck Sirius Black in the chest, flinging him back into the wardrobe. Lupin slammed it shut. Harry's body burst into smoke, fading away.

Monty sank to the ground, wrapping his arms around himself. Lupin hurried over to him.

"I'm so sorry, Monty," he said, kneeling down. "I never imagined..."

Snape cleared his throat. "Case in point."

Elusive Creatures

Chapter Summary

September 1993

Severus stared at the entrance to the Great Hall, waiting.

He knew, intellectually, that it had been a boggart. Boggarts did not discriminate between rational and irrational fears. It was all fun and games when it was spiders and mummies and certain Potions masters dressed in Augusta Longbottom's clothing. But when one saw the person who betrayed the woman you love murder your son, then turn his wand on her other son...

No one was laughing.

Lupin had attempted to console Potter. The boy had completely fallen to pieces upon seeing one of his friends die, though Severus wished the boggart had transformed into someone other than his son. He had no idea what Lupin would make of it. Hopefully he would only assume the boys were closer than they let on, and maybe teach Potter something more fatal than the Boggart-Banishing Charm.

Severus had seen, and done, his fair share of horrible things. He had been able to hold it together long enough to give Potter one of the Calming Draughts he always carried around. Lupin took Potter back to Gryffindor Tower, where Severus hoped the boy had the sense to keep his mouth shut about his boggart.

Severus was still watching the entrance hall when Harry appeared. Satisfied, Severus turned to his food and forced himself to eat. Starving himself in addition to staying up all night would elevate a nightmarish day to a hellish one.

"Who pissed in your cornflakes?" Burbage asked, sitting next to him.

Severus shook his head.

"Can't be that boggart thing?" she said, striking too close to home. "I would've thought your crowning achievement would be becoming a child's greatest fear."

He snorted dismissively. "I'm only a proximal fear, not a greatest fear."

"How modest of you," she said. "Lupin looks like shite too."

"The consequence of an ill-thought-out lesson," Severus said, watching Lupin walk towards the head table. Lupin glanced at the Slytherins, at Harry, frowning in thought. Severus'

fingers twitched for his wand. Surely the headmaster wouldn't begrudge him a little legilimency...

Burbage looked at him. "I'm guessing someone didn't have a childish fear."

Severus remained silent. Sirius Black, laughing over his son's dead body. Trying to kill Lily's other son.

Burbage sighed. "Well, it's his first time teaching. Mistakes are bound to happen. Though, he's already more popular than either of us."

Severus glanced at her, annoyed. "Then talk to him."

Burbage hummed, as if she really were thinking it over. "No. You're more fun."

Harry set a candle next to the framed newspaper clipping of his scowling grandmother, lighting it with a wave of his hand. Behind him, his gobstones team watched solemnly. Killian Avery, his oldest comrade. Tracey Davis, the rising star. Vincent Crabbe, who ceded his position as reserve beater to Millicent Bulstrode for love of gobstones. Ethan Harper, who had become more withdrawn after Harry's petrification, but was steadfast in his dedication to the team. Bridget Pritchard, daughter of Jodie Pritchard, author and editor of a considerable amount of anti-muggle propaganda in the years leading up to the fall of Voldemort. She liked gobstones. Derek Wilkes, a shy boy who also liked gobstones.

"A moment of silence for Captain Eileen Prince," Harry said, bowing his head. He hadn't yet talked to his dad about his grandmother. Harry had no idea who she had been, what she had done after her gobstones victory. All he knew was she had married a muggle named Tobias Snape, that she was dead, and that his dad didn't want to talk about it.

He wished he had got to know her.

"Alright," Harry said, lifting his head and turning back to his team. Seven was a fortuitous number of players to have, but he thought six was good. It had more divisors. "We are here for one thing and one thing only. We're here to play gobstones."

Harry paced back and forth, his gobstones captain badge silently spewing. "Three years of victory," he said, looking each of his players in the eye. Even young Derek, who was starting to realize what he had got himself into. "Three years we have shown this school what it means to be a stoner."

Killian sighed wearily. Harry had explained to him what the term meant in the muggle world. He couldn't let all of Captain Lament's practices die, though.

Harry pulled a scroll from his robes and handed it to Derek, who took it reverently.

“That is our practice schedule. Commit it to memory. We train five nights a week. As a prefect, I do have other obligations to attend to. So, Avery,” he said, stopping in front of Killian. “Congratulations, you’ve been promoted to vice captain.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Killian said with a wry smile. “I mean, Captain Evans.”

Harry nodded and continued pacing. “Five nights a week, at least one game a night. By the time the tournament comes around, you each will have played one hundred and fifty games. *At least.*”

He turned back to look at his grandmother’s picture.

It wasn’t just gobstones. They were the odd ones out. Halfbloods, mudbloods, people who were bullied, kids whose Death Eater parents lost all status after the war. People who needed a break from the common room, who might have been struggling in school, who needed something simple and fun to do after a long day. Captain Charity Lament had a true passion for gobstones, but she also cared deeply for her players.

“I hope to enact some changes this year,” Harry said, turning back to the team. “Typically, after a series of qualifying rounds, the top three players from each team move forward into the tournament. Similar to how the professional leagues work. But I want to give each of you the chance to play.”

“What are you planning, captain?” Tracey asked.

“I intend to petition Professor Sprout to make the tournament a round-robin.”

Harry patrolled the fifth-floor, Lady Madeleine walking at his side. Curfew for fifth-years was nine o’clock, but as a prefect he was exempted. He along with seven other prefects, two from each house, patrolled each of the castle's floors as well as the dungeons from curfew until midnight, in three-day cycles. There wasn’t much to do, and most prefects used the time to do homework while keeping an eye on things. Harry was reading while walking.

Lady Madeleine hissed, and Harry looked up from his book. “What is it?”

Mrs. Norris stepped out of a dark corridor and stared at Lady Madeleine. Harry was surprised to see Filch had let her roam on her own again. Perhaps seeing the decapitated basilisk had helped soothe him.

“It’s only Mrs. Norris,” Harry said, closing his book. He picked Lady Madeleine up.

Mrs. Norris meowed, padding forward.

Frowning, Harry carefully lowered his kitten back to the ground. “Her name’s Lady Madeleine. She’s just a kitten.”

Mrs. Norris gave him a reproachful look, then slowly stretched out to sniff at Lady Madeleine. Her Ladyship bore it gracefully. Mrs. Norris pulled back, sneezed, shook her head, then walked off.

“I guess that’s her seal of approval,” Harry said, watching Lady Madeleine clean her ears. After a moment, Harry went back to reading.

Harry had not seen much of Cedric since school began. The first few weeks of school had been busy, and Harry was still wondering what to do about his boyfriend situation. He hadn’t seen Cedric over the holiday, and they had exchanged very few, very brief notes. He hadn’t even *thought* about Cedric for weeks. He knew he had been dismissive of Jasmine’s words on the train, but she hadn’t said anything he hadn’t suspected himself. It made him feel exposed, though, having someone else point it out.

He vaguely hoped the problem would go away on its own. That they would drift apart without having to say or do anything at all.

Harry watched his fellow prefects attempt to cast the Patronus Charm. Most of them managed to produce a faint mist. A few were having no success at all. Of these, Harry was most troubled by Percy.

As the lesson wrapped up, Harry was considering ways to approach Percy about it. Even Monty could at least make something happen using a memory of flying. What was Percy thinking of? Or was it a matter of concentration?

Distracted, Harry bumped into someone. He looked up to see Cedric smiling down at him.

“Hey,” Cedric said. “Do you want to go for a walk?”

“Alright,” Harry said, watching as Percy left the Great Hall with Penelope. They were walking close together, their robes brushing. “Where to?”

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to check out,” Cedric said, taking his hand and pulling him out of the Great Hall. They passed by Haruka Endo, who gave Harry a sickly smile.

“What is it?” Harry asked as they walked up the grand staircase.

“Just something I’d been looking forward to if I became a prefect,” Cedric said. “I hear it’s pretty amazing.”

They reached the fifth floor, and Harry instantly knew where Cedric was taking him. He barely registered the statue of Boris the Bewildered and his switched gloves before Cedric had located the right door.

“Chocolatey delicious,” Cedric muttered to the door, grinning at Harry. Harry didn’t know who had come up with the password, but he hated them.

The door silently opened, and Cedric pulled Harry in. Harry shut the door behind himself, noting it had a rather sturdy deadbolt. If he ever did want to use this bathroom, he wouldn’t have to worry about someone coming in. Not that he’d only trust a deadbolt, but it indicated it wasn’t a communal space as he had feared.

“Oh, wow,” Cedric said. “This is brilliant!”

Harry turned around to look at the prefects’ bathroom. As much as he hated the password, Harry loved the bathroom. It was made entirely of white marble, lit by a gilded chandelier. White curtains fluttered over the windows, and there were piles of fluffy white towels. Best of all, there was a massive pool sunk into the floor, surrounded by gold taps that he was tempted to start fiddling with. After years of only bathing with cold water, Harry loved being able to take a hot bath. He would definitely be coming back here.

“It is,” Harry agreed, sharing a smile with Cedric.

Cedric stepped closer to him, pressing Harry against the wall. “I’ve barely seen you since school’s started,” he said, leaning down to kiss him.

“It’s been busy,” Harry said between kisses, feeling a little dizzy. “It’s our O.W.L. year.”

“I know,” Cedric said, running a hand down Harry’s side. Harry shuddered as Cedric’s hand slipped under his robes. “I really missed you.”

“I—” Harry stammered as Cedric worked fingers under his shirt. Cedric kissed him more insistently, his fingertips tracing burning lines across Harry’s bare skin. Harry put his hands against Cedric’s chest, not sure what he wanted to do. He liked Cedric. He liked doing this with Cedric. He liked the way Cedric made him feel, at least like this. He could feel Cedric against him, and he made an embarrassing noise that echoed through the bathroom.

Cedric’s fingers brushed against his bandage and stilled. He pulled back to look at Harry, his eyes concerned. Harry’s tentative excitement vanished. He now felt like throwing up.

“What’s that?” Cedric asked. “Did you get hurt?”

“It’s nothing,” Harry said. He smiled, hoping to reassure Cedric. “Just something I have to wear.”

“Oh, okay,” Cedric said, frowning slightly. “Why?”

Harry opened his mouth, though he had no idea what he was going to say. That it was none of Cedric’s business?

Just then, the door to the bathroom slammed open, revealing Astrid Urquhart in all of her muddy quidditch gear glory.

She paused when she saw them. “Alright, Haz?”

Harry gave Cedric a gentle push, and he backed away.

"I'll, uh, see you later," Cedric said, adjusting his robes. He hurried out of the bathroom, giving Harry one last look before the door closed behind him.

Harry sagged against the wall, sighing in relief.

Astrid began stripping off her quidditch gear. "Are you really okay, Harry?"

He swallowed, his heart still racing both from the snogging and how close Cedric had got to a secret of his.

"I don't know," he finally said, closing his eyes. "There's something I haven't told Cedric."

"You don't have to tell him shit if you don't want to," Astrid said. Harry heard the sound of water flowing and opened his eyes to see Astrid stripped down to her underclothes, turning on taps.

"Do you want me to leave?" Harry asked.

"I don't care," she said. "You're not going to gawp at me. You don't even like girls."

"Still," Harry said.

"And I don't like blokes, so it cancels out."

"That's not how it works," Harry began, then he paused. "You don't like boys? In general, or?"

Astrid gave him a dull look. "I'm not attracted to them. *Sexually*."

"Okay, Jesus," Harry said, laughing. "I get it. It's getting humid in here."

"No shit," Astrid said. "It's a bathroom. Have you gone numpty? Did Diggory do something to you? Should I kick his arse?"

"No, it's not his fault," Harry said, taking out his wand and casting a few charms at the door. "You haven't even locked the door."

Astrid shrugged, removing the last of her clothes and slipping into the water. Harry couldn't fathom how she was so comfortable.

"If someone waltzed in," she said, "I'd tell them to get in or get out, or be miserable and leave their robes on."

Harry hesitated, then began taking off his robes. He could do a test run with Astrid, see how she reacted to the information. It wasn't something people could tell from the outside, unless someone stuck their hand up his shirt.

He knew that Astrid wouldn't care. That it would be safe to tell her. That he was really just fooling himself that it was anything like telling Cedric.

"You getting in?" Astrid asked

"Unless you mind?" Harry asked. A bath would make him feel better too.

"I already said I didn't," Astrid said. "Are you sure Diggory didn't jinx you?"

"No, it's not that," Harry said. He hesitated with his hands on the hem of his shirt. "Fuck it," he said, and pulled it off.

Astrid raised an eyebrow.

"It's to bind my chest down," Harry said, gesturing to the bandage wrapped around him, the words coming easier than he thought they would. "I've got a condition where I didn't properly develop before I was born, so I've got a mix of parts."

Astrid's eyes strayed down to his trousers. "You've got meat and two veg, yeah?"

Harry blushed. "Yes. Christ, Astrid."

"Only curious," she said, turning around. "Yeah, you don't have to tell Diggory that. It's none of his business."

"I know," Harry said, taking off the rest of his clothes and scuttling into the water. He was grateful for the tap that released purple clouds, it gave him another measure of privacy. Though, as Astrid had established, she didn't care and wasn't interested.

"But if he's pawing at you, he might find out," she said, turning back around.

"Yeah," Harry said, closing his eyes. The water was the perfect temperature. The door was locked. Astrid didn't care. "I forgot that quidditch captains have access too."

Astrid grinned at him. "I didn't."

Percy was in the library one Sunday afternoon, studying with Penelope Clearwater. He enjoyed spending time with Penelope Clearwater. He lifted his quill from the page and dipped it into his inkwell. He looked up at Penelope Clearwater, who looked back at him, smiling with her thin lips. Her eyes were lovely, like two shallow pools of clear water.

Penelope Clearwater.

Penelope Clearwater.

“Excuse me,” someone with a quiet, melodic voice said. Percy imagined they were good at singing. He blinked, looking away from Penelope to see Harry standing there, his expression cool and unreadable. “I was hoping I could have your assistance with a matter.”

“What is it, Evans?” Penelope asked, setting her own quill down. It was the tail feather of a greater bird-of-paradise, long and elegant.

“Are either of you taking Care of Magical Creatures?” Harry asked. “I’m concerned about the direction the class is going.”

“I am,” Percy said.

“Concerned how?” Penelope asked.

“I’ve heard from some third-years that they are still on flobberworms,” Harry said. “And that the fifth-years are on unicorns. It’s been several weeks and no change.”

“We are meant to be studying demiguises,” Percy said, glad he had thought to owl order ingredients for a Wit-Sharpening Potion. William had been helpful in procuring ground scarab beetles. “Professor Hagrid has yet to succeed in locating one.”

Harry frowned. “That’s unusual for him.”

“Have you brought these concerns to any of the professors?” Penelope asked, looking Harry over. Percy felt a frisson of unease as she scrutinized him.

“I didn’t want to escalate it so quickly,” Harry said. “I was hoping if students brought their concerns directly to him, or perhaps went over Professor Kettleburn’s old curriculum with him, it could give Hagrid some direction. As Head Boy and Head Girl, your voices carry more weight.”

“That is true,” Penelope said, tapping her lips with one impeccably manicured finger. The color was called shell pink, like the throat of a conch. “Percy, what do you think?”

“I would be willing to speak with Hagrid,” he said, watching her face for a sign of approval.

Penelope smiled at him. “I’ll be waiting here. I would like to get started on our Muggle Studies essay today.”

“You’re taking it too?” Harry asked.

“I am,” Penelope said, turning her smile on Harry. “I find muggles absolutely fascinating. They have so many intriguing adaptations.”

“They do,” Harry said neutrally. “Noble savages, one might call them.”

“It shouldn’t take too long,” Percy said abruptly, standing up. “I shall be back shortly, Penny. Let’s go, Evans.”

Percy pushed his chair in and walked past Harry. Harry raised an eyebrow, but said nothing as he turned to follow.

“How have you been?” Harry asked as they left the library.

“Perfectly fine, thank you,” Percy said, not looking at him.

“That’s good to hear,” Harry said. “There’s been something I’ve wanted to talk to you about.”

“Perhaps we could save that for a later date,” Percy said. “I’m afraid I won’t have much time for superfluous discourse this year.”

Harry didn’t respond. Percy glanced at him, and saw him looking across the grounds, his expression remote.

“Sorry for antagonizing your girlfriend,” Harry said softly.

Percy frowned slightly. “I doubt she interpreted it that way.”

Harry snorted, then shook his head. “Never mind.”

They found Hagrid sitting on his porch, whittling a piece of wood with his boarhound Fang sleeping at his side. Harry produced his kitten from his robes, and she yawned.

“Good afternoon, professor,” Harry said, stepping forward.

“Afternoon, Harry, Percy,” Hagrid said, looking up from his work. “What are you two doing out here?”

“It’s kind of a touchy subject,” Harry said. He looked at Percy.

Percy straightened his glasses. “It is perhaps not the place of your students to criticize your teaching methods, but given recent events we feel it is necessary.”

Hagrid furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“Your classes are boring, Hagrid,” Harry said bluntly. “No one wants to come out and say it because they like you, and know you can be a great teacher. Who cares if Malfoy got a little scratch? I was petrified by a basilisk last year. Do you see me moping about it?”

Percy gave Harry a startled look. He hadn’t considered that argument.

“No, but that’s different,” Hagrid said thickly.

“Yes,” Percy said. “A basilisk is much worse than a hippogriff. Hippogriffs are noble creatures, and not given to violence unless profoundly aggrieved. Basilisks are, in a word, insane.”

“There’s got to be something between hippogriffs and flobberworms,” Harry said. “What was Kettleburn teaching to third-years?”

Lady Madeleine meowed.

“Kneazles,” Hagrid said. “Crups.”

“Porlocks and murtlaps,” Percy added. “There are plenty of generally safe creatures to teach the younger students about. I would be happy to review your curriculum with you.”

“You’d do that for me?” Hagrid asked, sniffing.

Harry stepped forward and all but shoved Lady Madeleine in Hagrid’s face. Hagrid wiped his eyes, then smiled at the kitten.

“It would be my pleasure,” Percy said. “My brother Charles has some contacts who may be able to help acquire some of the more elusive creatures.”

“Good old Charlie,” Hagrid said, gently petting Lady Madeleine with one massive finger.

“I can’t imagine he would be tending dragons in Romania if he had only learned about flobberworms,” Percy said.

“You’re right,” Hagrid said, looking up. “I’ve got to pull myself together.”

After some more conversation, Percy and Harry walked back to the castle.

“I think that went well,” Harry said. “The Board of Governors really did a number on him.”

Percy frowned. “They could have given him more direction than ‘start with flobberworms.’”

“Yeah,” Harry said, slowing as they neared the castle. “About the thing I wanted to talk about. Well, there are a few things.”

“What is it?” Percy asked, tensing.

“Granger’s got a Time-Turner,” Harry said. Percy looked at him in surprise.

“Could you talk to her about managing her time better? She keeps popping up all over the place, and I don’t think she’s using it to get in extra sleep or studying.”

How had he not noticed that? “Understood. I will see if she is amenable to advice, though we are instructed to only use them to attend the classes.”

“You need extra studying hours for extra instructional hours,” Harry said, shaking his head. “It’s absolutely mad to give those things to kids, even responsible ones. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, I reckon.”

“That is a muggle idiom?” Percy asked.

Harry grinned at him, his dark eyes sparkling. “I used to think it was about Trojan horses, which doesn’t make much sense because you’d *want* to check the horse’s mouth. It turns out people check horses’ teeth to confirm their age.”

“Really?” Percy asked, distracted by the curve of Harry’s cheek as he smiled.

“I’m not sure if they still do anymore,” Harry said. “I don’t know much about buying horseflesh. Aren’t you going back to the library?”

Percy blinked, realizing he had started to follow Harry into the dungeons. “You’re right, my apologies. What was the other thing you wanted to speak about?”

Harry frowned. “It’s about your patronus. Or lack thereof.”

“Ah, yes,” Percy said, feeling sick to his stomach. “The start of the year is quite demanding.”

“I told you all at the beginning that using a happy memory is essentially a crutch,” Harry said. “Not everyone has happy memories to draw on. What’s important is the feeling. What drives you?”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Percy said tightly. “Have a good afternoon, Evans.”

Harry sighed, turning to walk down into the dungeons. “You as well, Weasley.”

Percy watched Harry disappear into the gloom, the feeling of sickness increasing.

The library.

Penelope.

He shook his head, then turned to walk down the corridor leading back to the library. Halfway there he slipped into a broom cupboard, then pulled a small vial out of his pocket. He uncorked it, watching the pink liquid swirl. He only needed a drop.

Love Is All Around

Chapter Summary

October 1993

Chapter Notes

As I was writing this chapter, one of my fully grown adult ass cats jumped onto my shoulders and decided to take a nap. She has never once done this, even as a kitten. And now I have a fucking cat on my shoulder. Oh, thank god, she climbed down.

Anyway, I cried while writing this one. Make of that what you will.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry stood quietly as Lupin took another sip of his Wolfsbane. It was one of the most disgusting potions he had ever seen, and he had seen his dad brew many questionable potions. It wasn't something one would willingly consume unless they had no other choice.

"So," Lupin said, chasing the Wolfsbane with a sip of tea. "You're a muggleborn?"

"I am," Harry said, immediately on guard.

"It must be interesting to be a muggleborn in Slytherin," Lupin said, a little too casually.

"It hasn't come up much," Harry said. "For a while people believed I was the Heir of Slytherin, until I was petrified by a basilisk."

"I heard about that," Lupin said, smiling at him. "And that you worked it all out and left a message just before being petrified."

"Anyone could have worked it out," Harry said.

"Perhaps," Lupin said, taking another sip of Wolfsbane. "Where did you grow up?"

"Midlands," Harry said. It was obvious from his accent. He had to clear his mind. His mum had also grown up in Cokeworth. Did they have the same accent? He knew his dad had lost his, perhaps to fit in better with the rest of Slytherin. He should have thought about that, but it had been twelve years since anyone had heard Lily Evans' voice, and longer since she had been known as Lily Evans. But Lupin had known her. He had been in the same house as her

for seven years. Harry wasn't the only person with the surname *Evans*, not even in Cokeworth.

"Birmingham," he added. He'd been there before, he could fake familiarity if he had to.

"Ah," Lupin said, drinking more Wolfsbane. Harry wished he would just chug it. Did Lupin enjoy dragging it out?

"What about you?" Harry asked.

"Cardiff," Lupin said, smiling sadly.

"Really?" Harry asked. "*Wyt ti'n siarad cymraeg?*"

"Ydw," Lupin said. "It's been a long time since I've spoken it, though."

"I've just found this book in the library that's entirely in Welsh," Harry said. "Would you be able to help me translate it?"

"Oh? What is it?"

"I'm probably going to pronounce it wrong," Harry warned him. "*Cyfaddasrwydd y Drefn o Gadwedigaeth trwy Ffydd.*"

Lupin gave him a searching look. "Is that a book on magical theory?"

Harry nodded. "It's really dense."

"I would imagine so," Lupin said, chuckling. "That's a bit advanced for your age, isn't it?"

"Maybe," Harry said. "We don't learn much in class, though."

"No, I suppose not," Lupin said with a sigh. He finished off his Wolfsbane, grimacing. "Well, bring it by next time and I can give it a look. I can't promise I'll be able to help you with actually understanding it."

"Thank you," Harry said, taking the goblet. "Have a good night, sir."

Lupin looked forlornly out of the window. It was a full moon that night, but the moon had yet to rise.

"It'll be better than most," Lupin said quietly. "Run along, Harry. Give Severus my regards."

Severus stood in his office, tapping his wand idly as he waited for Harry to return.

The door opened.

Severus turned to look at his son, pointing his wand at him. Harry's eyes opened in surprise, though understanding was quick to follow.

"Legilimens."

Harry's conversation with Lupin was on his mind. His worry that Lupin might think he sounded like Lily. Birmingham. Welsh. Lupin finishing the potion. Before he could get further, Harry shoved him out of his mind.

"Better," Severus said, walking to his desk. "Not all intrusions will be that obvious. They will be subtle, insidious. Someone could be in your mind during a conversation, prompting you to think of the information they seek to take from it."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. He shut the door, then set the silver goblet on Severus' desk.

"How many times have you been to Birmingham?" he asked.

"Twice," Harry said.

Severus nodded, frowning at the goblet. "You do sound like your mother."

Harry's head snapped up.

"Before she started Hogwarts," he continued. "Her sister's accent also began changing when she began secondary school. I doubt anyone will ascertain your connection via your mode of speech."

"That's a relief," Harry said, sitting down. He reached for the coffee Severus had waiting for him, smiling faintly before smoothing out his expression. "I don't know why he seems suspicious of me. Because I'm a Slytherin?"

Severus looked down at his wand. "Possibly because of a certain student's boggart."

Harry stared at him. "What? What happened to him? He didn't tell me about any—"

"Legilimens!"

Harry walking into the trophy room. Opening a cabinet. Potter stepping through, a frail, neglected child in sack-like, threadbare clothes. *"Why didn't you save me?"*

He was violently ejected from Harry's mind. Harry closed his eyes, his face pained, then he took another sip of coffee. Severus winced, his head pounding.

"Better," he said. "There is a boggart in the staffroom. Lupin brought Potter there. I was attempting to read a book. Potter's boggart was Sirius Black killing you."

Harry opened his eyes again. "That's not good."

Severus humphed. "No, I dare say it isn't. My only guess is the boy sees you as someone willing to place yourself between him and Black."

“I am,” Harry said. “But I would do that for a lot of people.”

Severus watched his son quietly for a moment. “Do you have gobstones tonight?”

Harry shook his head. “Killian’s in charge since I’ve got rounds later.”

“Then we have some time to work on your own legilimency,” Severus said.

Harry gave him a small smile, then took out his wand.

An icy tingle ran down Harry's spine. He paused at the foot of the staircase leading to the seventh floor, looking up the darkened steps.

Monty’s head appeared out of nowhere. “How did you know I was here?” he whispered.

“Sixth sense,” Harry said with a shrug. Lady Madeleine brushed against his leg and meowed to be picked up. “You know, I haven’t taken points from anyone yet. Not even that first-year who called me a mudblood.”

Monty gaped at him. “But, you said—”

Harry started laughing, and Monty gave him a dirty look. He hopped the rest of the way down the stairs and Her Ladyship sauntered over to him for attention.

“Hagrid’s better,” Monty said, kneeling down to scratch Lady Madeleine. “Last week he said if anyone else ignores his instructions, they’ll get kicked out of the class, and good luck getting their O.W.L.”

Harry laughed again, glad he and Percy’s talk with Hagrid had yielded results. The thought of Percy made his laugh die down. Something was going on with him. He was more distant. He wouldn’t speak to Harry unless Harry spoke first. It was so different from how he had been over summer holiday.

“What are you learning in Care?” he asked.

“Last class Hagrid had a bunch of different cats, and we had to work out which ones were regular cats, which were half-kneazles, and which were kneazles.” Monty lifted up Lady Madeleine. “She’s a half-kneazle.”

“That sounds like fun,” Harry said, smiling. “But you already knew she was a half-kneazle.”

“It’s harder when they’re kittens,” Monty said. “You have to look at their ears, and if they have a tuft at the end of their tail. It’s even harder with half-kneazles. Hagrid says we can only meet creatures up to the XXX classification until we get our O.W.L.s.”

“That’s a good idea,” Harry said, wondering whose it had been. Percy’s, probably. “Let’s find a classroom we can practice in. Did you still want to work on the Patronus Charm?”

“If that’s okay,” Monty said, following Harry down the corridor.

Harry didn’t ask Monty about his boggart. He had seen what had happened, in his dad’s memory. It was disturbing, seeing his own dead body. Sirius Black cackling, pointing his wand at Monty next. He had seen Monty’s reaction too. The despair, the helplessness, the fear.

He crossed his arms, taking slow breaths. That light. It was the Killing Curse. Monty knew what the Killing Curse looked like. Somewhere, buried deep in his mind, Monty remembered Voldemort killing their mum.

They found an empty classroom on the fifth floor. Harry explained to his brother what spells he was using to lock the door, and make it so no sound would leave the room, but sound was able to enter. He sat at a desk and watched his brother attempt the Patronus Charm. Monty had a fierce expression, and the shield he cast was brighter and more solid than Harry had seen from him.

“What memory did you use?” Harry asked, once the shield had faded. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

Monty looked down, embarrassed. “When you told me you were taking me from the Dursleys.”

Harry nodded, not trusting himself to speak right away. “That’s pretty good, but it’s similar to when you were first told you’d be leaving the Dursleys, right? That’s a transient sort of happiness, because you knew you’d inevitably have to return.”

Monty’s shoulders dropped. “Yeah, there’s that.”

“It’s a caveat,” Harry said. “Same with flying a broom. At some point, you have to land.”

“Well, what’s your memory?” Monty asked, sounding a little annoyed.

“It’s not really a memory,” Harry admitted. “It’s a feeling.”

“What feeling, then?”

Harry looked to the side. “Love.”

Monty was silent.

“Specifically, loving someone else,” Harry said, putting his face in his hands. It was embarrassing to talk about. “The feeling of being loved might work, too. I think how the patronus is cast varies from person to person. What works for me might not work for you.”

“I don’t know what that’s like,” Monty said quietly.

Harry looked up at him. “Your parents loved you.”

“But I don’t remember them,” Monty said bitterly. He looked at the wand in his hand.

“The Patronus Charm is, fundamentally, a protection charm,” Harry said. “Your parents gave their lives to protect you. It’s the ultimate sacrifice.”

“Could that work?” Monty asked, looking up. “Really wanting to protect someone?”

“Yes,” Harry said, shivering. He rubbed his arms. “That could absolutely work.”

Harry had Monty leave first. He remained sitting in the empty classroom for some time.

It wasn’t fair.

Monty couldn’t remember what it felt like to be loved by his parents. Or anyone, because the people who should have loved him had done as little as they could get away with to keep him alive.

Sighing, Harry stood up and left the classroom. He still had some Dreamless Sleep he could use. He could go to sleep before the guilt could eat him alive.

As he rounded a corner, Harry spotted a small, diaphanous figure standing at the top of a staircase. He got his wand out again and slowly approached.

“Luna?”

Luna didn’t respond. She swayed back and forth on her toes. She only had a nightgown on, with a pattern of swimming plimpies on it, and her fine, white-blond hair was in a halo around her head.

“Luna, can you hear me?” he asked, taking a step down so he could look her in the face. Her eyes were half open, her face slack. She was sleepwalking.

“Let’s get you back to bed, mooncalf,” Harry said quietly. Given she was about to fall down a staircase, Harry levitated her. She didn’t even have slippers on, which he knew she usually wore in her sleep. Had they been stolen?

Harry carefully floated Luna up the spiraling staircase to Ravenclaw Tower, Lady Madeleine at his heels, stopping in front of the door with the bronze eagle knocker.

“Whence do conjured objects come?” the knocker asked.

“Do you want the short answer, or the long answer?” Harry asked. The knocker didn’t respond. “Fine. From nothing. That is to say, everything.”

Harry rolled his eyes as the door swung open. “An aphorism isn’t a riddle. Someone needs to check on that thing.”

He was relieved to see the Ravenclaw common room was empty. He laid Luna down on a couch near a fire, then summoned her own blanket to place over her. Harry sat down in a chair. Luna’s eyes were still open, and her breathing was frantic and shallow. What was she seeing?

“There’s a song my gran used to sing to me,” he said. “When she could still sing.”

He cleared his throat.

“Who could turn the world on with her smile? Who can take a nothing day and suddenly make it all seem worthwhile? Well, it’s you girl, and you should know it. With each glance and every little movement you show it. Love is all around, no need to waste it. You can have the town, why don’t you take it? You’re gonna make it after all...”

Luna’s eyes slowly closed, and her breathing became deeper and more even. His kitten jumped onto his lap and began purring.

“Come on,” Harry whispered to her, wiping his eyes. “Let’s go.”

Cedric had been avoiding Harry. It was hard to notice immediately, given their divergent schedules, but Harry could tell. Other people could tell. Everyone could tell. Cedric was no longer seeking him out in the library, or waving to him from the Hufflepuff table, or stopping him in corridors just to say *hello*.

It was fourth year all over again.

It made teaching the prefects how to cast the Patronus Charm awkward. The lack of progress didn’t help much, and Harry wasn’t sure what else he could do. Gemma Farley was doing the best, her misty shield sometimes forming indistinct limbs. Harry wasn’t willing to tell them what his patronus was made of. He told his brother, and he might tell his dad. Maybe Astrid. The people closest to him. He would even tell Percy, if Percy would ever look him in the eye.

Percy, finally, managed to produce a misty shield, laughing at his own success. Harry smiled at him, pleased that whatever problem Percy had was resolved.

Harry was thinking about asking one of the professors for advice on how to help his peers improve, maybe Lupin, when Cedric called his name.

“Can we talk?” Cedric asked, his expression troubled.

“Of course,” Harry said, his stomach twisting with anxiety. Was this it?

He was relieved when Cedric didn't lead him back up to the prefects' bathroom. It would have been a highly inappropriate place to have a serious discussion. Harry wasn't even sure he'd have been able to go back there if the memory of his brief encounter with Cedric hadn't been supplanted with one of Astrid Starkers.

Cedric instead led him to one of the courtyards. It was nearing curfew, so it was empty and silent, lit by the faint glow of torchlight through windows, and the cool light of the waning moon. Harry sat down on a cold stone bench, prepared for the worst.

"I've been thinking," Cedric said, sitting down next to him. "I know you have some secrets."

Harry tensed, and kept his eyes fixed on the ground.

Cedric sighed. "That's fine. I know you don't want to talk about your parents. It makes sense, I'm sure it's a painful memory."

Harry looked at Cedric. There was something off about the way he was speaking. Had he practiced this?

"But I'm worried that you're hurt and are hiding it," Cedric finished with a dejected look.

"I'm not hurt," Harry said. "It's just something I'm wearing for medical purposes."

"Right, you've said," Cedric said. "But what for? I would tell you if, I don't know, I broke my arm or something. And injuries like that can be healed really quickly."

"It's not an injury," Harry said, feeling a sick sense of dread. Had Cedric talked to someone about this? Had he told his friends? The same people who spread rumors that he'd killed his own mum?

"Then what is it?" Cedric asked, taking his hand. "Why can't you tell me?"

Harry closed his eyes. He knew relationships required some amount of trust. If he couldn't trust Cedric with something like this, why were they even dating? What was the point?

"If I tell you," he said, looking into Cedric's eyes, "you have to promise not to tell anyone else."

"I promise," Cedric said immediately.

Harry nodded, then took out his wand to cast a silencing charm around them. He didn't want anyone to hear. He didn't know if this was the right decision. "I'm intersex."

Cedric gave him a blank look. Harry sighed, knowing this was going to take a while to explain, dreading the questions Cedric might ask him. He tried to make it as simple as possible, leaving out concepts like chromosomes and DNA which had no analogue in the magical world.

When he was finished, Cedric looked relieved. This should have been a warning to Harry. He would have been prepared for the next words out of Cedric's mouth.

“So, you’re actually a girl?”

Cedric’s smile was so kind, so guileless, Harry almost gave him the benefit of the doubt. Then Cedric kept talking.

“I always thought you were a bit...feminine, I suppose. You know, I thought you were a girl at first.”

Harry stared at him. “My name’s Henry.”

“Is it?” Cedric said, surprised.

“McGonagall said it at the Sorting Ceremony,” Harry said flatly.

“I must have missed it, you were right after me,” Cedric said.

“Well, after, Endo,” Harry said.

“And everyone calls you Harry,” Cedric said. “I thought it was a cute nickname. And you were always with Urquhart, who’s also a bit of a tomboy.”

“Cedric,” Harry said. “I am a bloke. I’ve just explained it.”

“You’re very pretty for a bloke,” Cedric said, smiling at him. “And you’ve said you’ve got...” he waved at Harry’s chest.

“Right,” Harry said, fishing around in his robes. He found a Calming Draught.

“What’s that for?” Cedric asked.

“My continued sanity,” Harry muttered, uncorking the vial and swallowing the draught in one gulp.

“It explains a lot of things,” Cedric said idly. “Dad’s going to be relieved. He’s never been too keen on me dating another bloke.”

“You don’t say,” Harry said, reaching for his wand. “I’m knackered, and it’s getting cold. Want to head in?”

“Yeah,” Cedric said, leaning forward to kiss him. Harry was very thankful for occlumency, otherwise he might have *accidentally* blasted Cedric across the courtyard.

They stood, and began walking back to the castle.

It had been a mistake. A very, very big mistake. Harry couldn’t comprehend how Cedric thought of him, and he didn’t want to know. Cedric didn’t even see him as male and, newly armed with Harry’s private medical information, never would.

There was only one way Harry could see this not ending poorly.

“Cedric,” he said, taking out his wand. “I’m sorry.”

“What for?” Cedric asked, turning to look at him. “It’s alright you didn’t tell me sooner, I really don’t—”

“*Obliviate.*”

Percy watched Harry leave the Great Hall with Diggory.

He knew why he couldn’t cast a patronus. How could he not? So he had forwent the potion that day, remembering the moment he grabbed Harry’s arm in Diagon Alley. Those dark eyes, that impish smile.

“*Nice to see you too, Percival.*”

He had laughed when finally, finally he was able to produce a non-corporeal patronus. And the smile Harry had given him...

“Are you coming, Percy?” Penelope asked him. Percy looked over at her. “I still have about eighteen inches to write for Charms.”

“I actually have some correspondence to catch up with,” he said, trying to sound apologetic. He just wanted to go. “I haven’t written my mother back. She says *hello*, by the way.”

Penelope smiled at him. “Send her my best, would you?”

Percy nodded, then left the Great Hall. He looked around to see if he could find where Diggory had absconded with Harry, but it was a big castle and they could have been anywhere. He walked quickly to Gryffindor Tower, not wanting to speak to anyone. The common room was riotous, as usual, and he put up a shield when Fred chucked a lit firework at him, not caring where it landed. When he got into his dormitory, Oliver was there, applying some substance to the bristles of his broom.

“Alright, Percy?” Oliver said, not looking up from his work.

“Good evening,” Percy said, sitting at his desk. He resisted the urge to take more of the potion. Madam Pomfrey was starting to suspect he was lying. If he took it only when Penelope was in the mood...

Grimacing, Percy found parchment and quill and began composing a letter to his mother. He pressed his palm to his eye, wincing as a headache began to grow.

Dear Mother, he wrote, *Penelope is doing well, thank you for asking. She is a very suitable young woman...*

The door to Severus' office flew open, and shut just as quickly. It was Harry, breathing heavily, rapidly casting spells, laying silencing charms so dense Severus was surprised he could still breathe.

"What is it?" he asked, jumping out of his seat, his wand in his hand so fast it could have materialized there. "What has happened?"

"I did something," Harry said, his voice devoid of emotion. "Something questionable."

"What?" Severus demanded.

"I obliviated Cedric," Harry said. "I told him about my condition. He called me...he said I was..."

Severus hurried over to his son. Harry was shaking violently. What did he need? Severus lifted his arms awkwardly. How was he, Severus Snape, meant to comfort someone?

He suddenly found his arms filled with a fifteen-year-old boy. Harry clung to him.

"I shouldn't have told him," Harry mumbled

"No," Severus agreed, rubbing his back. He recalled his mother doing something similar, many years ago. "It was a mistake, and you have corrected it. I taught you that charm specifically so you could protect yourself, and that is exactly what you did."

Harry shook his head.

Severus sighed, tightening his hold briefly before releasing his son. "I've done far worse things than modifying someone's memory, Harry." He walked back to his desk. It was fortunate he consumed so much coffee and didn't need to summon a house-elf to deliver some. In the future, having the requisite supplies on hand would be convenient. At least he hadn't drunk everything in the carafe.

Severus sat down, and Harry mechanically walked forward and sat across from him.

"I've tortured people," he said, conjuring a cup to pour Harry some coffee. "I've killed. I've used Unforgivables."

Harry silently took the cup, holding it in both hands.

"I never liked Diggory," Severus said, pouring himself another cup. He suspected it was going to be a long night.

"You don't like anyone," Harry said, finally taking a sip of his coffee.

Severus watched him. He had hugged his son, for the first time. That was more remarkable than Harry's wilful use of memory charms.

He smiled into his cup. “There are a few exceptions.”

Chapter End Notes

Fully untranslated Welsh

"Do you speak Welsh?"

"Yes."

The book is called *Compatibility of the Order of Preservation through Faith*

And a cover of the song: [Love is All Around](#)

Charming Men

Chapter Summary

October/Halloween 1993

Chapter Notes

I am obsessed with what is happening in the comments

Harry needed to send a thank-you letter to Astrid's parents. Maybe a fruit basket. She was a godsend. He knew Oliver Wood scheduled his training sessions three nights a week, and that Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff hadn't even started practicing yet. Harry's lip curled at the thought of Hufflepuff, but he sighed and placed a hand on Lady Madeleine's back.

Astrid had the team practicing from dawn five days a week. The morning after Harry's little chat with Cedric, after a night he slept through thanks to the providence of potions, Harry had woken up to find an empty dormitory. He was alone, save for his sleeping kitten and the mysterious fish that followed him everywhere.

He *needed* to be alone. He hadn't known how complicated other people could make his life. How easily they could hurt him.

Music helped. The wireless rested on his bedside table, jinxed so if Adrian tried to touch it he'd talk backwards for a few hours. It was funny. Harry would have to think of a new jinx since Adrian thought it was funny too, and had begun doing it on purpose.

The wireless was an exceptional piece of magical technology, if a bear to use. It was almost impossible to find the same station again. It had taken Harry some time to work out the dials. One changed the frequency, one the volume, and another the wireless' apparent location. If Harry got it wrong, he'd get a dozen overlapping broadcasts transmitting at the same frequency from different parts of the world. He didn't even know what the fourth dial was for. He was afraid to touch it.

Harry wanted to roll over but it would disturb Lady Madeleine, so he did his best impression of a pillow for her.

He knew he needed to deal with Cedric Diggory.

He started laughing when a new song came on.

“Punctured bicycle on a hillside desolate...”

He rolled over and covered his head, ignoring his kitten’s irritated mewling.

“Will nature make a man of me yet?”

He kept laughing brokenly, wiping his eyes. “Bloody arsehole.”

“When in this charming car...”

They hadn’t even broken up yet. Harry had only sent Cedric on his merry way with a spanking new set of memories.

“This charming man...”

He grabbed a pillow and put it over his head. He felt like screaming.

“Why pamper life’s complexity when the leather runs smooth on the passenger seat?”

He could feel his kitten’s claws pricking his side, the low rumble of her purring.

“I would go out tonight, but I haven’t got a stitch to wear...”

Harry sat up when the dormitory door was kicked open.

“This man said, ‘It’s gruesome that someone so handsome should care...’”

“Listening to that muggle rubbish again?” Adrian said. He had a massive bruise forming on the side of his face. “Ireland’s playing. Think we could listen?”

Cassius and Terence trailed in after him, all looking rough from the brutal pace Astrid set.

“He did ask nicely this time,” Terence said with a grin.

“He knows so much about these things...”

“Yeah, why not,” Harry said, changing the station.

Percy finished sticking the Hogsmeade announcement to the notice board, standing back to admire his work. The paper was flush with the sides of the notice board, yet it still looked skewed. He frowned, taking another step back, then grabbed the sides of the notice board to adjust the whole thing. Satisfied, Percy went up to his dormitory. He was meeting Penelope Clearwater in the library and needed to work on an essay about demiguises. Charles had reached out to a friend of his who was in Laos studying naga, and a demiguise had been acquired.

As he was walking through the common room, study materials acquired, a disturbance stopped Percy in his tracks.

“Oi! Get off, you stupid animal!”

Percy spun around. Hermione’s cat, Crookshanks, had sunk his claws into Ron’s bag, hissing and spitting like a wild thing, clawing Ron’s bag to shreds.

“Ron, don’t hurt him!” Hermione shrieked

Ron swung his bag around as if throwing a garden gnome. Scabbers flew out of the top and ran as fast as his elderly body could move. Crookshanks kicked himself free of the remains of Ron’s bag and darted after the rat.

“Catch that cat!” Ron shouted.

George lunged at Crookshanks, missing narrowly. Percy took out his wand, but hesitated. Crookshanks was moving too fast, too erratically, and the common room was filled with people. The cat crashed into a chest of drawers and began swiping under it, growling, his fur standing on end.

Percy stormed over as Hermione finally got hold of her cat. Ron was on his stomach, pulling Scabbers out by his tail. The entire common room was watching. Percy closed his eyes in annoyance. Dealing with people in his own house was always the hardest.

“Miss Granger,” Percy said, standing between her and Ron. “If you cannot prevent your cat from attacking others, he will have to go.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Crookshanks doesn’t understand! He’s a cat, it’s in his nature to chase rats!”

“Then it is *your* responsibility,” Percy said. “That it may be instinct to him is irrelevant. You chose to get that cat after he had already attacked Ron and Scabbers. I know what happened in the Magical Menagerie. Ron was all scratched up after Crookshanks used his head as a springboard to get at Scabbers.”

“But, I,” Hermione stammered, her eyes beginning to water. “He’s a half-kneazle.”

“Then he should be intelligent enough to not attack other pets,” Percy said, looking down at Crookshanks. Crookshanks glared back. “And intelligent enough to know that, if it happens again, I will bring the matter to Professor McGonagall. Your cat has also torn apart all of Ron’s school things.”

“I can fix that,” Hermione said hastily, a few tears escaping. “I’ll...I’ll just put Crookshanks up in my dormitory.”

Percy noted Hermione seemed tired. Sleep deprived. It would affect her rational thinking. He needed to speak with McGonagall about that too.

“You do that,” he said. “And make sure he stays there.”

Hermione nodded then hurried off, the crowd parting for her to pass.

“Don’t you all have homework to do?” Percy said, frowning at the onlookers. He turned to Ron, who was still fuming. Scabbers was looking awful. He was exceedingly old for a rat. It was a sad thought, but Percy feared Scabbers was not long for the world.

“Thanks,” Ron muttered. “I could have handled it, though.”

“Maybe we can get a cage for Scabbers,” Percy suggested. “That way he’ll be safe in your dormitory too.”

Ron shrugged, then shuffled through the common room and up to his dormitory

Percy silently watched his brother disappear up the staircase.

Someone clapped his shoulder.

“Good job, Perce,” Fred said. “You made a girl cry.”

“As expected of the second Head Boy in the family,” George added.

Percy checked his watch. “I’m going to be late meeting Penelope.”

Fred and George exchanged looks.

“About that,” George said.

“Lately, you’ve been a bit,” Fred started, looking at George for help.

“Off,” George finished.

Percy shook his head. “I don’t have time for this.”

He walked to the portrait hole, leaving Fred and George behind. A few floors down, he found an empty classroom to slip into. He shut the door, then leaned against it. He just needed a moment to compose himself. Just a moment.

Percy grabbed his hair and sank to the floor, squeezing his eyes shut. He had only wanted to help his little brother, and do the right thing. How could something so simple as telling someone off about their out-of-control cat go poorly? Making Hermione cry, Ron’s...he didn’t even know. Resentment? Percy knew Ron was prone to jealousy, it was something they all had to struggle with to some extent. He had thought Ron finally getting his own wand would help matters...

Percy hit his head against the door. Maybe it would have been better if he had stayed out of it completely. What was the point? They never appreciated anything he did.

He hated feeling like this.

He hit his head again, then reached into his robes. He was starting to run out of the potion. He didn't need much, just enough to get through the night.

Burbage smiled happily as she made an active volcano out of her mashed potatoes and gravy, giggling occasionally. They had both fallen silent to eavesdrop on Lupin talking to McGonagall about about a certain Divination professor's auguries. If there was one colleague Severus loathed more than Lupin, it was Sybill Trelawney. Why did the drop of Seer blood in her have to reveal itself that night? With that prophecy?

Through some twist of fate, the third-years had avoided her fortelling one of their deaths. Trelawney had targeted Potter, no surprise there, but the boy had somehow turned it around on her.

Severus glanced to where a girl was crying at the Gryffindor table, comforted by one of her friends. Lavender Brown, whose rabbit had died. The rabbit's name was Binky. Severus did not wish to know this, but he had heard the story repeated enough around the school that he had little choice in the matter.

He glared when Lupin started laughing at something McGonagall said.

Burbage poked him in the side with her fork.

"What," he growled, turning his glare on her.

"Don't worry, I licked it off," she said innocently. "What's your deal with *A Welsh Werewolf in Scotland* anyway?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, that was a stretch," she said. "Honestly, though. What is it? Not your type?"

Severus stared blankly at her. "I prefer vertebrates."

Burbage winced. "Ouch. I remember what he was like in school. Quiet, always in the background."

Lupin laughed again.

"But people change, you know," she said, twirling her fork around.

Severus scoffed. "People never change."

Burbage turned back to her food, shaking her head. "God, I hope that isn't true. For both our sakes."

Harry walked into the Great Hall, trying to emulate his friends' high spirits. It was Halloween, and the first Hogsmeade visit of the year. He glanced at the Gryffindor table and saw Monty chatting happily with his friends. He looked at the Hufflepuff table, catching Cedric's eye. Cedric gave him a big grin. Harry smiled back, despite the nausea.

Two weeks, and Cedric remained blissfully unaware of his altered memories. He'd run with the story of a spell backfiring on Harry. Of how embarrassed Harry was by it. Harry was sure whoever Cedric had told about the bandage got a good laugh out of it.

He hadn't had much time to think about what kind of fictitious spell damage he had done, and went with vanishing his ribcage. Better than some growth on his chest; that came far too close to the truth, though it would have got bigger laughs. It was all so very fun to laugh at Harry's expense.

He sat at the Slytherin table, letting the conversation wash over him. Halloween was a bad day, and it seemed appropriate to initiate a bad thing himself. He was going to end it with Cedric. He could barely stand to look at him anymore, and the thought of Cedric touching him made his skin crawl.

Luna slid into the seat next to him. "Good morning, Harry."

"Good morning, Luna," he said, smiling at her.

"I had a dream," she said. "It was such a lovely dream."

"Was it?"

Luna nodded. "It was about my mum. She was singing to me."

Harry smiled. "That does sound like a lovely dream."

Breakfast passed slowly, even with Luna making her unique observations about the world. He wished there was some way to make time move faster, instead of crawling along like a snail with him struggling through its slimy trail.

Eventually, he found himself in the entrance hall, waiting for Filch to sign him out, Cedric's arm across his shoulders. It felt like a yoke.

"Be careful with this one, Diggory," McManus said, leering at Harry. "Make sure his wand's pointed the right way!"

Harry smiled as Cedric's friends laughed. Astrid was right. They were tossers.

Cedric leaned down, smiling at him. "Are you all healed up from that spell backfiring?"

“Right as rain,” Harry said.

“Brilliant,” Cedric said. “By the way, my dad’s meeting us at the Three Broomsticks.”

Cedric squeezed his shoulders.

“Brill,” Harry said dully.

They walked across the grounds, stepping onto the road that wound its way into Hogsmeade. At the gates, they passed two dementors. Cedric pressed closer to him, shivering. All Harry could hear was coughing. Wet, bloody coughing.

He reached into his robes, gripped his wand.

“Harry...”

And then the coughing stopped. Forever.

Harry hated Halloween.

Percy sidled into the apothecary. Penelope was at the Three Broomsticks, getting a table for them. He just needed a few things, he was running low.

“How can I help you?” the apothecary asked when he reached the counter.

“I would like an ounce of pearl dust and a scruple of moonstone,” Percy said.

“I’m afraid I’m fresh out of moonstone,” she said. “I got a batch in yesterday, but they’ve got to cure for another month.”

Percy nodded. “Just the pearl dust, then.”

“Who’s the lucky lady?” the apothecary asked as she weighed it out.

“I’m revising for N.E.W.T.s,” Percy said.

She chuckled. “I’ve heard that excuse before. Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me.” She folded the packet neatly and set it on the counter. “That’ll be ten galleons.”

Percy clenched his teeth at the price. That would be nearly all of his savings. He took the coins out of his purse and set them on the counter. He picked up the precious packet. “Thank you.”

“A bit of advice, boy,” the apothecary said as she gathered the coins. “If it isn’t real, it isn’t worth it.”

“Thank you,” Percy repeated, turning to leave before she could give him any more unwelcome *advice*.

Outside, the air was crisp. Autumn was his favorite season.

Percy closed his eyes for a moment, let the cold wind blow through him. He sighed, then started towards the Three Broomsticks. Professors Lupin and Snape passed by. Professor Snape looked disgruntled, while Professor Lupin was smiling at the students, delighted by the festive atmosphere. Percy passed by Honeydukes, where he saw Ron with Monty and Hermione, all three smiling, eating free samples of a new fudge. They waffled over steaming pumpkin pasties and bubbling cauldron cakes, chattering sugar skulls and ghoulish toffee apples, flush with the joy of their first visit to Hogsmeade.

Harry liked toffee apples.

Percy shook his head. Penelope was waiting for him.

He remembered the way his family used to talk about Uncle Bilius. Flamboyant Uncle Bilius. Lifelong bachelor Uncle Bilius. *He just needs to find the right witch* Uncle Bilius. Drunk Uncle Bilius. Dead Uncle Bilius. An old wizard no one knew crying silently at the funeral, who was *just friends* with Uncle Bilius.

Percy opened the door to the Three Broomsticks, nose wrinkling as he was assaulted by the sickly sweet scent of butterbeer, mouth-watering roast, the spice of firewhiskey. He scanned the room for Penelope, but his eyes caught on something that made him almost as sick as the smell.

Harry, sitting with Cedric Diggory and Amos Diggory.

Percy tore his eyes away and spotted Penelope. She had chosen a table in the middle of the room. All the better to be seen.

Smiling, Percy walked towards her.

Harry smiled as Cedric and Amos Diggory laughed about something he had missed, too distracted by Percy walking into the pub. He knew Percy was busy, and that he likely preferred to spend his free time with his girlfriend, but Harry missed their conversations.

“And how have you been, Harry?” Mr. Diggory loudly asked. He was such a gregarious fellow. A real hoot and a half.

“I’ve been well, thank you,” Harry said. “Are you here for Buckbeak?”

Mr. Diggory looked stumped for a moment, then he puffed up. “That’s the hippogriff, right! Yes. You’ve read that in the papers, have you?”

“I did,” Harry said. Cedric was smiling nearly as broadly as his dad.

“Well, all the paperwork checked out,” Mr. Diggory said, taking a swig of his Fishy Green Ale. He was well on his way to getting sloshed. “Can never know with someone like Hagrid.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked carefully.

Mr. Diggory waved his bottle around. “Oh, you know.”

Harry didn’t know. He glanced at Cedric, who was nodding along with whatever his dad said. Jasmine was right. He *was* a gimboird.

“This morning we did the inspection,” Mr. Diggory said. “Boring stuff. Are you sure you lads want to hear?”

“I’m interested in your work,” Harry said neutrally. Cedric beamed at him.

“Oh, alright then,” Mr. Diggory said, grunting as he sat upright. “I won’t get into the breed standards, that’s for those hippogriff fanciers, very top-drawer stuff.”

Harry nodded.

“Most owners are required to disillusion the hippogriff if they live in a muggle area,” Mr. Diggory said, setting the bottle down. “That doesn’t apply if they’ve got the property under muggle-repelling charms. They’re also not allowed for personal transportation, but you can ride them around your property. The trouble is the lack of safety precautions.”

“Safety precautions?” Harry asked.

Mr. Diggory nodded. “Clipping their wings, declawing, beak trimming.”

“I see,” Harry said, taking a sip of his butterbeer. It wasn’t doing its job.

Control your emotions. Discipline your mind.

He wished his dad was there. Severus Snape could tear Amos Diggory apart without the man even knowing it.

“It’s for their own safety too,” Mr. Diggory said, punctuating this with a fishy belch. “Pardon me.”

“Dad,” Cedric said, blushing.

Mr. Diggory chuckled, slapping Cedric on the back. “That’s *one* good thing about a chap, they haven’t got any delicate sensibilities!” He picked up his bottle and shook it around. “I’ll get another round. You boys sit tight.”

Mr. Diggory stood and walked unsteadily to the bar.

“Mutilating hippogriffs for their own good,” Harry said, shaking his head.

“What do you mean?” Cedric asked.

“You don’t agree with him, do you?” Harry asked.

Cedric made a face. “That hippogriff is dangerous, Harry. He’s already attacked one student. It doesn’t matter whether Malfoy baited him or not, Hagrid had no control over the situation.”

“Is that you talking, or your dad?” Harry asked.

Cedric flushed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Never mind,” Harry said, taking another sip of butterbeer. They sat in awkward silence until Mr. Diggory returned with a new drink for himself and one for Cedric. Harry laughed to himself. What a petty snub.

“I tell you,” Mr. Diggory said effusively, “that hippogriff has caused me a lot of *hippogrief*!”

“Alright,” Harry said, standing up. “I’m leaving.”

“What?” Cedric asked.

“I need to see a man about a dog,” Harry said.

“But you’ve got a cat,” Cedric said, baffled.

“You’re going to the pet shop?” Mr. Diggory asked, uncorking his beer. “Well, don’t take too long. Rosmerta’s almost done with the roast.”

Harry started walking away. He crossed his arms, passing Percy’s table.

“Wait up, Harry,” Cedric said, hurrying ahead to open the door. “Why are you in such a rush?”

“I don’t think this is working out, Cedric,” Harry said. He started down the road to the castle.

“Is it because of the hippogriff thing?” Cedric asked. He sounded so confused. He sounded like an idiot.

Harry had a choice to make. He could either be honest with Cedric, or he could lie. Being honest with Cedric had never failed to backfire on him. So he lied.

“This year’s been really stressful so far,” Harry said. He stopped near the edge of town. He didn’t want to go back to Hogwarts next to Cedric. He didn’t want to be associated with him in any capacity. “I don’t think I have time to be someone’s boyfriend. I’m sorry, Cedric.”

“Do you not like me anymore?” Cedric asked.

Harry shook his head. “I just want to focus on school. At least until O.W.L.s are over.”

“Oh,” Cedric said, crestfallen. “You do study a lot.”

The bushes nearby rustled. Harry glanced at them, but couldn’t see what had made the noise. Probably just a squirrel.

“Yes,” Harry said, turning back to Cedric. “You should go have lunch with your dad.”

“So this is it?” Cedric said.

“We can still be friends,” Harry offered, with no intention of following through. “You’re very distracting. It’s hard to concentrate on my studies.”

Cedric ran a hand through his gorgeous, perfectly tousled hair. “Maybe you’re right. O.W.L.s are really important.”

“Especially if you plan on going into the Ministry like your dad,” Harry said.

Cedric smiled at him. “We’ll have time in the future, I guess. Well, can I kiss you?”

Harry smiled back, though it made him feel dirty. “One for the road.”

After Cedric got his last kiss, Harry watched him strut his way back into Hogsmeade. Amos Diggory would probably buy a round for the entire pub once he heard the good news.

Harry spat, wiped his mouth, then walked back to the castle.

Percy watched Diggory chase Harry out of the Three Broomsticks.

“Diggory’s introduced him to his father,” Penelope said. “Things must be getting serious between them.”

“It would seem so,” Percy said, turning back to her. “You were saying?”

“Father wants to take us to the ballet over winter holiday,” Penelope said. “Some muggle production. The Nutcracker, I believe. Do you think your Aunt Muriel would be interested?”

Percy nodded absently as she continued to talk, and talk, and talk. All he could think about was Harry’s aghast expression, marring his refined countenance, when Amos Diggory had uttered *hippogrief*.

“Diggory keeps looking over here,” Astrid muttered.

Adrian grinned at him. “Did you get your end away?”

Harry sighed, looking up at the cloud of bats flying between flaming orange streamers, hundreds of grinning pumpkins lit by candles, ghosts dancing in an endless waltz. “We’ve broken up.”

There was a dead silence.

“As expected,” Cassius said, shuffling his new pack of tarot cards. Death flipped to the top of the deck, a skeleton riding a thestral. The thestral silently screeched.

“Benjy used to do that,” Harry said sadly. He was more upset about his toy thestral than his boyfriend of eight months.

“You knew this would happen?” Phoebe said to Cassius, snatching the card and squinting at it.

“It was fated,” Cassius said loftily, taking the card back.

Astrid rolled her eyes. “Come off it.”

Adrian reached over and clapped his shoulder. “Sorry, mate.”

“It’s about time,” Jasmine said. She looked ashamed for a moment, then said, “I *am* sorry, Harry.”

Harry shrugged. “I’m not. You were right.”

Jasmine winced, then leaned over to give him a brief hug.

“At least I won’t feel bad when I beat him,” Terence said, smiling.

Harry smiled back. “No more divided loyalties. Rampant Occamies for life.”

“Yes!” Phoebe said, jumping up. “I’m not the only one who *knows*, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that that is our team name!”

“What are you on about?” Adrian asked, frowning at her.

“The Rampant Occamies!”

“Not this again,” Astrid groaned.

“Jasmine, design the coat of arms!”

Jasmine stuck her hand out.

Phoebe frowned at it. “What’s that for?”

“Money.”

“Where’s your team spirit?” Phoebe wailed.

Harry laughed, and his friends were soon distracted as the feast began. He looked over at the Gryffindor table, where his brother was smiling and laughing with his own friends. Heartened, Harry began filling his plate. Halloween might have been a bad day, but not every part of it was.

Harry was playing a game of gobstones with Derek, who had eaten far too much sugar at the feast and was close to literally bouncing off the walls.

“How do you like Hogwarts so far?” he asked.

“It’s amazing!” Derek said. “I didn’t think I would be allowed to come.”

“Why not?” Harry asked. “You’re a wizard.”

“Yeah, but…” Derek looked around, then leaned close to whisper, “My mum’s a squib.”

Harry hummed, looking around the gobstones field. “Even squibs have a place in our world.”

“What do you mean?” Derek asked.

Harry was about to answer when his dad stormed into the common room.

“All students are to report to the Great Hall,” he said, his words laden with an ominous undertone. “Group up by year. Prefects, distribute yourselves among the year groups. Do not wander off, do not speak.”

Confused, Harry gathered the first-years. Something had happened. Something terrible. Another attack?

He looked into his dad’s eyes. Only the most powerful witches and wizards could do wandless and wordless legilimency. His dad was one of them. He was a masterful Legilimens.

Harry was chilled to the bone as one thought was placed into his mind.

Sirius Black had broken into the castle.

Nightfire

Chapter Summary

November 1993

Percy watched the doors to the entrance hall shut behind Professor Dumbledore. He turned to look at the hundreds of students standing in confusion, the Gryffindors already spreading the story of what happened. The Fat Lady's portrait, slashed. Sirius Black in the castle.

"Everyone into their sleeping bags!" he shouted, getting everyone's attention. "Come on, now, no more talking! Lights out in ten minutes!"

He waited a moment to see that his instructions were followed. "Prefects, to me."

Penelope walked up to him, an approving look on her face. "Is it true? Sirius Black was in the castle?"

"According to Peeves," Percy said, watching as the other prefects made their way towards him.

Harry stood out, as he always did. His kitten was balanced on his shoulder, her green eyes narrowed and looking around the hall. Harry had already taken off his school robes and was wearing a black jumper Percy recognized. The one his mother had made too small, that he insisted on sending to Harry last Christmas. It looked perfect on Harry. But there was something cold about him that made Percy shudder. Harry had his wand out, and a stony expression. Yet his dark eyes were alive. So alive.

Percy cleared his throat. "Alright, we need to cover all entrances."

He directed several prefects to stand guard at the main doors, at the windows, the door to the portrait hall.

Harry raised his hand. Cedric Diggory looked at Harry with a strangely conflicted expression.

"Yes, Evans?" Percy asked.

"I'll guard the antechamber," Harry stated, brooking no argument.

Percy nodded. "Very well. Penelope and I, and everyone I haven't named, will watch over the students."

He began a circuit around the room, Penelope at his side. The students were whispering to each other, making guesses at how Black had got in. All were implausible—disguises

wouldn't fool dementors—or outright impossible, such as apparition. Few were in their sleeping bags.

“How do you think he got in?” Penelope asked as they completed their lap around the hall.

“I would defer to Professor Dumbledore,” Percy said. “He is more familiar with the protective enchantments on the castle and grounds, and would be able to identify any points of weakness.”

The problem was that the headmaster hadn't done so, if Black truly had got in.

Percy checked his pocket watch. “The lights are going out now!” he shouted. “I want everyone in their sleeping bags, and no more talking!”

He took out his wand and put all of the candles out. People were still talking, which was frustrating, but Percy doubted even a professor could get them to stop completely. Cold silvery light filled the hall as ghosts drifted in to speak with the prefects. Percy looked up. It was a clear night, and the stars were splayed across the ceiling.

“We should check on the lower years,” Percy suggested. “I'm sure the first-years are in a state.”

Penelope nodded. “I'll take the Ravenclaws and Slytherins.”

Percy wanted to protest. He would prefer to deal with the Slytherins, but knew some of them would be hostile to him for being a Gryffindor, or a Weasley. He turned away from Penelope and immediately sought out his younger siblings. He had to keep them safe.

Harry stood beside the door to the room where the incoming first-years waited, Lady Madeleine curled up at his feet. The Bloody Baron silently floated next to him. The Baron wasn't one for small talk, and neither was Harry.

Jasmine was with the first-years, making sure they settled in. Harry looked away from her, to where his brother was. That Monty had just so happened to have dragged his sleeping bag to the corner next the antechamber was a complete coincidence. Luna had joined Monty's friends, laying her sleeping bag next to Monty's and crawling inside.

Percy was walking among the sleeping bags, trying to shush those still talking. He was moving closer to Harry, pausing next to where Monty and his friends were huddled together, no doubt checking on Ron. He looked up and met Harry's eyes, then started walking over.

“Interesting, isn't it,” Harry said in a low tone. “How he broke in when we were all at the feast.”

“Some have speculated it was because he forgot what day it is,” Percy said, drawing close to him.

“I doubt he would forget the anniversary of the... You-Know-Who’s defeat,” Harry said. “One would think someone clever enough to escape Azkaban would be clever enough to check a calendar.”

“I doubt Black is rational after over a decade in Azkaban,” Percy said. “Who can say what he thinks or why?”

Harry raised an eyebrow, but didn’t reply. He had always had misgivings about Sirius Black, as much as he hated him. His gran never did understand why Black betrayed his mum. And now, on the anniversary of his mum’s death, he had tried to get into Gryffindor Tower at a time when no one was there. And fled instead of killing anyone.

“I saw you in the Three Broomstick today,” Percy said out of the blue.

“Did you?” Harry said, smiling faintly. “You should have said something.”

“You were with Diggory,” Percy said.

“And you were with your girlfriend,” Harry said, glancing at him. “In any case, I’m no longer *with* Cedric. I’ve broken up with him.”

Percy looked poleaxed. “Have you?”

“I have,” Harry said. “I was worried about people gossiping about it, but I doubt it’ll be on anyone’s mind after tonight. Small mercies.”

Percy pushed up his glasses. “You were meeting with his father.”

“His father, who I can’t stand,” Harry said. “Cedric’s a more attractive version of his father. It’s appalling.”

“Well,” Percy said. “Well.”

Harry chuckled. “Don’t worry, I’m not cut up about it. I’m not even sure he’s...”

He shook his head. He didn’t need to tell Percy about the little chat he’d had with Cedric, the upsetting conclusions Harry had come to. He spotted Penelope circulating closer and nodded towards her. “I think your girlfriend is looking for you.”

Percy flinched, then looked over at Penelope. “You’re right. If you’ll excuse me, Evans.”

“By all means, Weasley,” Harry said, watching Percy walk away.

Harry sighed. The Bloody Baron rattled his chains.

“How do you think Sir Nicholas talks with his head mostly cut off?” Harry asked. “His mouth isn’t connected to his lungs anymore.”

The Bloody Baron turned to stare at Harry with his empty, sinister gaze.

“I know not,” he intoned. “Yet I yearn for the blessed day he ceases.”

Monty couldn't sleep. He had brought his wand with him to the feast. He brought it with him everywhere. He hadn't let go of it since seeing the Fat Lady slashed up. He was relieved to see Harry standing close by. He felt safer with him near.

Next to him, Luna had managed to fall asleep. He smiled at her peaceful expression, then flinched back in alarm as she abruptly sat up.

Harry hurried over, kneeling next to her. “Luna?”

Her eyes were wide, looking around sightlessly. “The knarls are loose in the garden. They... I've knitted this ear for you. No! The plimpie stew is cold. But, that's not how—”

Harry put his hand on Luna's shoulder and gently shook her. “Luna, wake up.”

Luna jerked, then blinked owlsh. “Mum?” she said, sounding lost.

“You're in the Great Hall,” Harry said quietly. “We're sleeping in here tonight, remember?”

Luna blinked a few more times, then looked at Harry. “We're sleeping in the Great Hall. It's like a sleepover with all my friends.”

Harry smiled gently. “That's exactly right.”

“Harry, can you make your patronus?” Luna asked in a small voice.

Harry glanced at Monty for a long moment, then turned back to Luna. “No problem. *Expecto patronum*.”

A silver-blue lobster swam out of Harry's wand and circled them. Monty watched it, his chest filling with an emotion he couldn't name.

“Why don't you take Her Ladyship too,” Harry said.

Lady Madeleine appeared from behind Harry's legs, jumping over Luna to lay down between her and Monty.

Luna wormed back into her sleeping bag. “Can you sing a song? You have such a wonderful voice.”

Harry covered his eyes and sighed. “Fine. Any more demands?”

Luna shook her head.

“What about you, Monty?”

Monty’s eyes opened in surprise. Harry *never* called him by his given name around other people. Well, except for Luna.

“No,” Monty said, pulling his sleeping bag up.

“It might help to take your glasses off if you want to sleep,” Harry said wryly.

Monty just kept looking at him. “Are you going to sing?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Who knew being a prefect involved so much singing? Alright. Don’t laugh.”

Harry took a breath and began to softly sing. “Hey there, Georgy girl. Swinging down the street so fancy-free. Nobody you meet could ever see the loneliness there, inside you....”

Monty yawned, then took off his glasses. He set them next to Lady Madeleine, and closed his eyes.

“So shed those dowdy feathers and fly...a little bit...”

Percy sighed as he interrupted yet another whispered conversation. At least the older students had the wherewithal to use silencing charms. He was going to take points from the next people he caught. Or just start casting Sleeping Charms at everyone in sight.

Straightening, he saw the headmaster enter the Great Hall and look around. Professor Dumbledore spotted him and quietly approached.

“Any sign of him, professor?” he asked quietly.

“No. All well here?”

“Everything is under control, sir.”

Professor Dumbledore nodded, then looked over the students. He explained that another portrait had been found to guard Gryffindor Tower, and that the Fat Lady had taken refuge in a map of Argyllshire on the second floor.

The doors to the Great Hall opened again, and Professor Snape strode through, heading directly for the headmaster.

“The entire castle has been searched,” Professor Snape said when he reached them.
“Nothing.”

“I didn’t expect him to linger,” Professor Dumbledore said.

Professor Snape looked over to where Harry was leaning against a wall, watching them intently. “We should discuss this further in private,” he said.

“Very well,” Professor Dumbledore said. “I must speak with the dementors first.”

“Did they want to help, sir?” Percy asked.

“Oh, yes,” Professor Dumbledore said, watching Harry’s lobster patronus as it circled the hall. “Though I doubt they would make it very far in the attempt.”

Severus stood next to the window in the headmaster’s office, staring across the dark grounds. Black was out there. Somewhere.

He turned when the door opened, admitting Lupin.

“How did he get in?” Severus demanded.

Lupin closed his eyes, then looked at Dumbledore. “I don’t know.”

“If you’re lying to me, Lupin, my office will shortly feature a wolfskin rug.”

“Severus,” Dumbledore said in a tired voice. “I don’t believe a single person in this castle would help Sirius Black enter it.”

“As you say,” Severus said, his eyes not leaving Lupin.

Lupin shuffled forward and dropped into a chair. Severus knew the full moon was soon. He had to brew the potion, after all.

“I want to protect Monty as much as anyone,” Lupin said, shutting his eyes in a pained expression. “That boy is absolutely terrified of Sirius Black.”

“Is he?” Dumbledore said.

Lupin glanced at Severus. He narrowed his eyes in warning.

“Monty wished to face a boggart,” Lupin said. “I was concerned it would be Lord Voldemort, and did not allow him to do so with the rest of the class.”

“What was it?” Dumbledore asked.

“Sirius Black,” Lupin said shortly. “Killing his friends.”

Dumbledore nodded, turning to look out of a window. “A rather pragmatic fear.”

“Have you any theories as to how he got in, professor?” Severus asked.

“Many, Severus,” Dumbledore said, turning back to look at him. “Each of them as unlikely as the next.”

“Why did he break in today?” Lupin said quietly.

“Obviously to commemorate the deaths of his *closest friends* by murdering their son,” Severus said acidly.

Lupin shook his head, but said nothing. Typical.

There was a knock at the door, and McGonagall entered.

“You called for me, Albus?” she said.

“Thank you for joining us, Minerva,” Dumbledore said, lacing his fingers together. “I would like to discuss some new security measures.”

McGonagall frowned, taking a seat next to Lupin. Severus crossed his arms and waited to hear Dumbledore’s brilliant idea.

An emergency prefect meeting was called, first thing in the morning the night after Sirius Black’s break in. Harry hadn’t slept at all, guarding his brother vigilantly through the night.

Someone had the foresight to ask the house-elves to serve breakfast in the prefects’ lounge. Harry nearly cried when he saw coffee. Jasmine was sitting next to him, not looking much better. Someone sat down on his other side, and Harry looked over. It was Cedric.

“Morning,” Cedric said with a blinding smile. Harry squinted. Cedric looked fresh as a daisy.

“Good morning,” Harry said, turning back to his coffee.

Their invigorating conversation was interrupted when Percy and Penelope walked in.

“Wonderful, everyone is here,” Penelope said in a chipper voice. It was like nails on a chalkboard. “Word has come down from the headmaster regarding how we do rounds. From now on, two prefects will be patrolling each floor.”

“Penny and I have drawn up the new schedules,” Percy said, distributing rolls of parchment. Harry opened his, seeing who he was scheduled with. Mostly other Slytherin prefects, some

Ravenclaws and Gryffindors. Not a single Hufflepuff. Cedric wasn't even scheduled on the same days as him.

He could have kissed Percy.

"We will also be shifting our focus from learning the Patronus Charm to Defense revision," Penelope said. "Professors Lupin and Snape will be instructing us."

The response to this was divided. All of the Slytherins liked, or at least respected, Harry's dad, but the same couldn't be said for the others.

"Are there any questions?" Percy asked, looking around. "Good. The professors are busy securing the castle against further trespass, so we need to do our best to support them. This means ensuring discipline among our fellow students and making ourselves available for any academic questions they have."

"We need to present a strong, united front," Penelope said, smiling at them. "Now, let's have breakfast, shall we?"

Monty stepped into Professor McGonagall's office. He had no idea why she had summoned him. She regarded him with somber eyes as he shut the door. His pulse quickened as he sat across from her.

"There's no point in hiding it from you any longer, Potter," she said. She took a breath, visibly steeling herself, then said, "I know this will come as a shock, but Sirius Black is targeting you."

Monty swallowed. "Why, professor?"

"I'm afraid I cannot say," she said.

Monty very much doubted that. "Did you know him when he was a student?"

"I did," Professor McGonagall admitted. "But he is a very different person from the boy he once was. I never suspected..." She closed her eyes, shaking her head slightly. "I've called you here because, in order to ensure your safety, the headmaster has decided to revoke some of your privileges."

"What?" Monty said, sitting up. "What do you mean?"

"You will not be allowed to visit Hogsmeade," Professor McGonagall said. "I'm sorry, Potter. There are just too many opportunities for you to be attacked in town. I also don't believe it is a good idea for you to practice quidditch in the evenings, with only your team members. The pitch is very exposed. It seems the Slytherin team has the pitch booked nearly every morning, but I could speak with Professor Snape about switching times."

Monty gaped at her. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "He's able to get into the castle! What's to say I'm actually safe here?"

Professor McGonagall looked sternly down at him. "Hogwarts has ancient protections, not to mention all of your professors here to defend you. We have far more control at Hogwarts than in Hogsmeade."

"And what about quidditch?" Monty asked, gripping his robes. "We have a game on Saturday!"

Professor McGonagall narrowed her eyes in thought. "We may be able to have a professor accompany you. Perhaps Madam Hooch."

Monty left Professor McGonagall's office still agitated. No Hogsmeade? He understood that his life was more important than going to Honeydukes or buying stink pellets at Zonko's, but what about the other students? Who was to say Sirius Black wouldn't attack them?

What about Harry?

Seething, Monty stormed back to Gryffindor Tower. The little knight Sir Cadogan was sitting on his chubby grey pony, inexpertly swinging his sword around. With one particularly wild swing, he fell off his pony.

"Aha! I shan't be unmanned so easily!"

"Thou cream faced loon," Monty spat.

"You wound me!" Sir Cadogan cried, swinging open. Monty climbed into the portrait hole, glad he hadn't been issued a challenge. He was in a foul enough mood he might have pulled a Sirius Black, and then who would guard the common room?

Monty walked past his friends, ignoring their questions. He would tell them the wonderful news later, when he calmed down. Instead, he went to his dormitory and threw open his trunk. He dug around until he found the photo album, then climbed into his bed and shut the curtains.

He flipped to the picture of his parents' wedding. The wedding at which Sirius Black had been best man.

Monty stared at the smiling young man. He didn't look insane, or like he was able to kill so many people. He looked happy. He looked happy for Monty's parents.

He closed his eyes. He was so angry, so confused, and, deep down, he was scared.

Monty opened his eyes again and studied Sirius Black. Black hair, dark eyes. Monty could see some resemblance to Harry, though perhaps Harry took after whoever his mother had been. He knew almost everyone in the Black family had been in Slytherin. Would Sirius Black expect his son to be in Gryffindor, like he had been?

Godfather.

He knew Sirius Black had wanted to take him after his parents had been murdered. For what? To kill him too? Why not just kill him and Hagrid both?

He made a noise of discontent.

Godfather.

If Harry *was* Sirius Black's son, they could have grown up together. Like brothers.

Monty shut the album and put it back in his trunk.

Harry walked up and down the seventh-floor corridor. He had his rounds with Alicia Spinnet, who had wanted to take the route around the Fat Lady. Rather, the Fat Lady's former location, as she had been replaced with Sir Cadogan whilst she gallivanted about Argyllshire. Harry would have preferred to guard Gryffindor Tower, but hadn't been able to come up with a valid reason for it. Alicia was a Gryffindor, and would therefore be more invested in guarding her own house.

Harry turned around and walked back down the corridor, Lady Madeleine padding silently at his side. He wished he had something to read, but he needed to stay alert. Rain lashed against the windows, rattling them in their frames. There was no telling when Sirius Black would make another attempt, or how.

His dad had suggested he try to use fewer Calming Draughts. Occlumency, the mental discipline it required, would be just as effective. Harry was really getting sick of the taste of peppermint, so it was just as well.

Sighing, he turned around at the end of the corridor and started back. He glanced at the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy trying to teach trolls ballet, shaking his head as a troll spun around in an attempt at fourth position.

He looked away, and froze when he saw a door had appeared in the opposite wall.

Harry took out his wand. Lady Madeleine gave an inquisitive meow.

"I don't know," Harry said. "It's suspicious. Stay back, I'm going to open it."

Lady Madeleine walked some distance down the corridor and sat, staring at him.

"Alohomora."

Harry watched in surprise as the door swung inwards. Holding his wand out, he slowly approached it. Inside, there was a library.

"What the fuck," he whispered, looking around. "What is this place?"

Lady Madeleine darted in.

“No!”

She stopped, then turned around to look at him.

Harry heaved a sigh of relief. “We can explore after our round is finished. And as soon as I work out how this even happened.”

Not wanting to chase his kitten down, Harry levitated her out of the strange library and shut the door. At least he had something to think about during the rest of his shift.

Lupin had a rough transformation, in his words, and was slow to recover. This was how Severus found himself teaching two Defense classes in addition to the Potions classes he had that day.

Monty Potter was missing.

Lupin had left him no notes, but he did have the man’s syllabus. Severus did not want to commit to a syllabus. With the number of accidents in Potions, it made it difficult to predict how far along his planned curriculum a given class would get.

Five minutes had passed, and Potter had yet to appear. Severus silently regarded the students as he considered what to do. Had the boy been snatched between classes? Was he merely tardy?

Severus sighed and picked up the syllabus.

“According to this,” he said, ignoring the horrified looks many of the Gryffindors were giving him, “You have, in the past two months, covered boggarts, red caps, kappas, and grindylows. Is that correct?”

The door to the classroom flew open, and Potter dashed in.

“Sorry I’m late, Professor Lupin, I—”

Potter stopped talking and gaped at him.

“The lesson began ten minutes ago, Potter. Five points from Gryffindor. Sit down.”

Potter hesitated, then walked to his seat. “Is Professor Lupin alright? Sir?”

“He’ll live,” Severus said. “Now, as I was saying—”

Granger’s had shot into the air.

“Yes, Granger?”

“We’re due to start hinkypunks, sir,” she said eagerly.

“Two months, and you’re only now starting hinkypunks,” Severus said, shaking his head. He picked up *The Essential Defense Against the Dark Arts* and checked the index. “Turn to page ninety-eight. Can someone tell me another name for the hinkypunk? Someone other than Granger?”

To his complete astonishment, Potter raised his hand. The boy hadn’t even opened his book.

“Yes?” Severus asked.

“Hinkypunks are also known as will-o’-the-wisps, sir,” Potter said. “But they have lots of other names. Should I list them all?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Go on, then.”

Cats and Dogs

Chapter Summary

November 1993

Chapter Notes

I've made one correction to the last chapter. Dementors don't fly, per book canon, but they can sense emotions for a considerable distance.

Astrid stood her ground against two bulky beaters.

“You can’t expect us to play in this weather,” Lucian Bole said, glaring down at her.

Astrid sneered at him. “It’s quidditch.”

“It’s absolutely pissing,” Peregrine Derrick said, also looming. He and Lucian towered over Astrid. Astrid didn’t seem to notice.

Harry looked at one of their lacustrine windows. The waters of the Black Lake were a churning, muddy mess. The weather was truly miserable, and he was worried how his brother would fare during the next day's match. He had developed a superstition about his brother and quidditch almost as severe as his one about Halloween. Both were made worse by being based in reality.

Draco Malfoy, his arm still in a sling, was standing to the side, watching the proceedings with a smug grin.

“What I’m hearing,” Astrid said, turning her sneer on Peregrine, “is that you haven’t got the bollocks to go up against Gryffindor.”

“Our seeker’s injured,” Lucian said.

Astrid turned around to look at Terence, who was playing a game of Exploding Snap with Jasmine and a few of the more prickly first-years, Jason Mulciber and Mephistopheles Thorne.

“Higgs!”

Terence waved without looking, then his hand of cards exploded in his face.

“He’s in peak condition,” Astrid said, turning back to the two sixth-year beaters. “We’re playing. We aren’t cravens, we’re Slytherins.”

Graham Montague sighed noisily. He stood up from the wall he had been leaning against and ambled over to stand next to Astrid. “Leave off. Urquhart’s captain, her word is final. You two wouldn’t be whingeing at Flint.”

“All of my team is willing to play tomorrow,” Astrid said, “except for you two. I’ve got Bulstrode on reserve.”

She pointed at Millie, who cracked her knuckles.

“A third-year. You think she cares about a little water? She drinks water for breakfast!”

There was another small explosion from the Exploding Snap game, and Harry looked over to see Jasmine patting Mephistopheles’ smoldering hair. She stood up, said something to the two first-years, then walked over to Harry.

“We ought to head out,” she said, brushing her hands off.

Harry closed his book and stood, Lady Madeleine jumping down from his lap. “Have fun with your mutiny,” he said.

Astrid waved dismissively at him, still facing down the two beaters, who were looking much less confident. Harry suspected Draco had put them up to it, in an attempt to undermine Astrid. Astrid would strap a pig to a broom before backing out of a game. And even if Lucian and Peregrine backed out, and Millie and Greg if Draco pressured them, Astrid only needed to find two people to sit on the brooms and look pretty. Beaters were nice to have, but not strictly necessary. She’d probably think the game was more fun without them.

He left the common room and headed up to the seventh floor for his prefect round that evening. The weather had been steadily getting worse all week, making the corridors colder and darker as the storm battered the castle.

Since free time was hard to come by, Harry had started doing his school work during class. It gave him some time to work on the mystery of the door that had appeared on the seventh floor. Harry had analyzed his actions from that night. He had wanted a book to read, and a room filled with books had appeared. When he had closed the door it had vanished, melting back into the wall. He had replicated his actions, walking back and forth and thinking about wanting a book, and the door had reappeared. It was strange to him that there would be a library with an entrance with such a specific requirement. Just walking back and forth had done nothing. What if he had wanted a quill? Would he have found a room filled with different feathers?

The book he was reading was one he had taken from the room to test if it would continue existing outside of it. What was really interesting was that it was a muggle book, *The Once and Future King*. Not something that would be found in the school library, where Merlin was an actual person and not a mythical figure, someone who had once been a student at Hogwarts.

Where had it come from?

Harry parted ways with Jasmine on the second floor, then continued upstairs. He was somewhat dismayed that he was sharing seventh floor duties with Penelope Clearwater. He imagined she had some assignation with Percy planned. He wanted to laugh at the hypocrisy, but then he would remember seeing Percy with her in the dungeons.

It wasn't very funny.

Penelope was on the other side of the castle, though, loitering around Gryffindor Tower for her midnight tryst, so Harry was spared having to see her. Even months later he would still sometimes recall that moment, that instant of desolation when he realized that he had never stood a chance. It was as if an enchantment had been broken, he was so thoroughly disabused.

Harry paused at the top of the last staircase to catch his breath. It didn't matter. There weren't many people at Hogwarts close to his age, and other than Astrid he didn't know any who were gay. He wasn't even sure about Cedric. Had he just been curious? Was it a lark?

Harry crossed his arms, sickened by the thought of being used like that. He didn't think Cedric had done so intentionally, or that he had been malicious. He was too ingenuous for that. Maybe his mates had put him up to it.

Lady Madeleine brushed against his leg and meowed. Harry started down the seventh floor corridor. He doubted he'd have better luck in the muggle world. At least the magical community didn't have violent gay bashing, not that he had seen.

He sighed as he passed by the pirouetting trolls. Harry had more important things to be worried about, things of more immediate concern. Where did the book come from? He paced back and forth in front of the wall where the door had appeared. He didn't know if he had to walk the entire length of the corridor, but he had hours to test that.

To his surprise, the door that appeared was the same as the one he had first seen, a polished door of dark wood with a brass door knob. Thinking he would see the strange library again, Harry opened the door. He stared in awe at what lay behind it.

Harry barely noticed Lady Madeleine running past him as he looked at the towers of junk.

He shut the door behind him.

"What is this place?" he whispered, walking down one of the paths formed between all of the items. The room was huge, lined with tall windows darkened by the night and rain. As he looked through the things—broken furniture, dusty mirrors, discarded robes, school bags, congealed potions, taxidermied creatures, old sweets fuzzy with lint, toys, hats, jewelry, stacks and stacks of books—Harry got the impression this was a sort of attic for Hogwarts, where all the old and forgotten things ended up. How had he never heard of it before? It certainly wasn't common knowledge. At least, not for the students.

"Flopsy?" he said. She was the house-elf his dad usually called.

She appeared in front of him and curtsied. “Flopsy is here, Mr. Evans!”

“You’ve been at Hogwarts a long time,” Harry said. “Do you know what this place is?”

Flopsy nodded. “It’s the Come and Go Room, or the Room of Requirement. It appears as what the seeker needs.”

“Thank you, Flopsy,” he said, examining what appeared to be a suit of troll armor. The house-elf popped away.

“What the seeker needs,” Harry said, looking at the windows. He snorted. What a certain seeker needed was for his glasses to not fall off tomorrow.

“Maddie?” Harry called out. There was a muffled *meow*, and Lady Madeleine trotted up with a rubber snake twice her size, dragging it by the tail.

“Stay close,” Harry said, retreating to a wall. He didn’t want to get pelted from all directions. “I have a feeling this might cause an avalanche. *Accio quidditch goggles!*”

There was a series of crashes and clatters, the sound of wood cracking and glass breaking, dull thuds as items fell, and several dozen small objects raced towards him. They stopped in front of Harry then dropped to the floor.

“Cool,” Harry said, kneeling down to look through the goggles. Lady Madeleine dragged her toy snake over to watch.

The goggles were mostly old, mostly broken, the leather worn, the glass fogged, and the findings rusted. Nothing a little magic couldn’t sort out. He spotted a nice pair with lenses that caught the light in an odd way. Harry turned the goggles over to better examine. On the inside of the strap, something had been embossed. Harry held it up to his eyes.

Property of James Potter

Harry nearly dropped the goggles.

“His dad must have lost these,” Harry said quietly to Lady Madeleine, who was gnawing on her snake. “I think they’re charmed so he didn’t need to wear his glasses under.”

He had to get back to patrolling the seventh floor, so he stuffed the goggles into his robes, picked up Lady Madeleine, and left the Room of Requirement for another day.

Monty spooned porridge into his mouth, barely tasting it. He had woken at half four, hours before dawn, thanks to Peeves breathing down his neck. Then there had been Crookshanks and his multiple break in attempts. Not to mention the clamor of the storm that had been going on all night. The ceiling of the Great Hall was a portentous confusion of swirling greys.

There weren't many other people up this early. He knew that Harry usually was, but since he was a prefect he'd been showing up later, usually with the Slytherin first-years. Monty would have liked to talk to him before the game.

They were playing against Slytherin, and Harry had friends on the team. Maybe it would have been too much to ask for someone in another house to support him. The Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs always threw their support behind Gryffindor. Monty thought it must be even harder for Harry since his boyfriend was the seeker and captain of the Hufflepuff team.

Oliver had been frantic all week, pushing them harder and harder during practice. Monty couldn't even follow Oliver's analysis of the Slytherin team. It was Oliver's last year, and his last chance at the Cup, but also Astrid Urquhart's first year as captain. She had a lot to prove. Not only that, she was a keeper like Oliver. Oliver saw her as some sort of fated rival.

Yawning, Monty set his spoon down in his porridge and reached for his cup of tea. A flash of white caught his eye, and he looked up to see Hedwig flying towards him.

"You're early," Monty said, watching her land on the table. He blinked a few times, and saw that a package had been tied to her leg.

"Who's this from?" Monty asked, untying it. Hedwig shook out her wet feathers, then settled down to peck at a sausage. Monty sighed and took out his wand to dry them both off, then he unwrapped the package.

It was a pair of goggles. Monty picked them up, admiring the dark red leather and polished brass rims. The lenses were clear as crystal. He looked down at the parchment it had been wrapped in and saw a message had been written on the inside.

Check the inside of the strap

If you win, I'll show you where I found these

Stay warm and dry

Good luck

There wasn't a name, not even a little drawing of a thestral, but Monty knew who had sent the goggles. He recognized the handwriting.

Smiling, Monty checked the inside of the strap.

Madam Hooch's whistle was barely audible over the howling of the wind. Harry still heard it, and turned to see the players just as they rose above the stands. He was sorry to miss the first game of the season, given his favorite people were playing, but Harry had been conscripted to stand guard outside the pitch. The other prefects, several professors, Filch, and Hagrid had also been distributed around the pitch, none visible in the driving rain. If they spotted anything out of place, they were to send up sparks.

He twirled the charmed umbrella Jasmine had given him, flicking water off only for it to be immediately replaced. He wouldn't have minded one of her lacy parasols, but the umbrella was a solid black.

Harry knew he shouldn't be grateful for Sirius Black breaking in, but it had spared him some trouble with Cedric. The entire school had done nothing but talk about the break in all week. Harry didn't think they were asking the right questions. There were plenty of ways to get into the castle. The real issue was how he had got past the dementors.

Lee Jordan said something that was impossible to decipher. Harry doubted he, or anyone else, could see what was going on. Except Monty. He had spent some time analyzing the enchantments on James Potter's old goggles. Vision correction, night vision, impervious to liquids and semi-liquids such as mud. Harry had tested the goggles, in the hours before dawn, just to make sure they would work for Monty.

The goggles were something someone might give their son after making quidditch captain, and the sort of thing an affluent only child might lose track of. Harry was tempted to go back to the Room of the Requirement and see if his mum had lost anything, but he doubted it. She hadn't grown up in a way that would make her careless about her belongings. Harry knew, as he hadn't either.

Hours passed. The sky grew darker, the wind colder. Harry pulled his mum's cloak tighter around himself, grateful for the charms keeping him warm. He hoped Monty understood his note and had charmed his quidditch robes. There was a flash of lightning, and Harry heard Madam Hooch's whistle. A foul? How would she even tell? Perhaps someone had called a time out. He had no way of knowing

There was another flash of lightning, and a deafening clap of thunder. The storm was right on top of them. Lightning was a danger at the heights Monty flew. Harry's stomach coiled with worry. The temperature dropped further, and Harry shivered. It gave him pause.

Harry narrowed his eyes and stared into the gloom. He shouldn't have been shivering, his mum's charms were powerful. Another flash of lightning dazzled him, and Harry squeezed his eyes shut. It had become eerily silent.

He opened his eyes again, and was suffused by an unrelenting chill.

Dementors.

Dozens of dementors, gliding across the grounds. Towering cloaked figures silently, inexorably, moving towards him.

Harry dropped the umbrella and pulled out his wand, his hand shaking. A single dementor was one thing. This was an army.

He shot red sparks into the air, hoping someone would see. He couldn't run. He was all that stood between the dementors and his brother. He didn't want to contemplate dementors approaching from the other side of the pitch. Hopefully his fellow prefects would be able to hold them off.

He ignored the rattle of his grandmother's dying breath and pointed his wand at the dementors.

They would get to Monty over his dead body.

"Expecto patronum!"

Severus sat in the stands of possibly the most tedious quidditch game in history. Hours sitting outside watching the rain, with the occasional appearance of soaking wet red or green robes, and Lee Jordan's garbled commentary. Such a pleasant way to spend the weekend.

There was a flash of lightning, and Jordan's babbling grew more excited. Severus hoped it heralded the end of the game.

"I think they've spotted the snitch," Burbage said, eating chips out of a steaming bag. He had no idea where she had got them from. He was tempted to ask if he could have one.

Severus sighed, then sat bolt upright. Red sparks, from the area his son was guarding.

His son was in danger.

He leapt up and ran out of the stands. As he nearly slipped on the wet staircase, he cursed himself for lack of foresight. Why hadn't he thought to bring a broom?

On the ground, he ran flat out. He had lived at Hogwarts since he was eleven-years-old, with a brief interlude to serve the Dark Lord, and had been up and down its abundance of staircases countless times. It hadn't made him a sprinter, but Severus ran.

It was much colder out of the stands. Suspiciously cold. He glared into the rain and cast his patronus. The relief was immediate.

There was a dark shape lying in the mud, illuminated by a dull silvery light. Tall, dark figures were retreating into the rain.

Severus slid to halt and dropped to his knees, rolling his son over. Harry's eyes were closed, his skin a deathly white, his lips blue. His floundering lobster patronus faded away.

"No, no, no," Severus muttered, waving his wand over his son's still form.

Harry took a shuddering breath, then mumbled something about dead bodies.

Someone splashed through the mud towards him.

"Severus," Burbage said, panting. "The kid. Is he okay?"

"He needs more help than I can give him here," he said, lifting his son up. "He wasn't Kissed."

"Thank fuck," Burbage said. Others were appearing, having also seen the sparks Harry had sent up. Prefects, some of his colleagues. The headmaster, McGonagall. He ignored them.

"Severus," Dumbledore said, his voice tight with controlled fury. "I will speak with the dementors. This is an outrageous intrusion upon school grounds. To assault one of our students—"

"I am taking him to the infirmary," Severus said to no one in particular. They were irrelevant.

He began walking to the castle, carrying his son in his arms. Harry was cold. Very cold. Not even the charms his cloak was imbued with were keeping him warm.

Burbage followed, surprising him by casting her own patronus. It was a sheep.

"Baa," she said. "My parents are sheep farmers."

"Mine are dead," he said.

Burbage snorted. "Oh, god. I'm sorry."

"I'm not," he said, looking down at Harry's face. The boy was still holding his wand.

Burbage lightly touched his arm, and he kept walking.

Percy patrolled the first floor, restlessly pacing up and down the corridors. He had been on the other side of the quidditch pitch from Harry. He had been too late, arriving only to see Professor Snape carrying Harry's limp body back to the castle. Madam Pomfrey had shut out

all visitors. It had been hours, and no one had yet emerged. No one had been let in, no matter how much Urquhart pounded and screamed.

He checked his pocket watch, watching the floating dials fix on arcane numerals. It was almost midnight. His round would soon be over.

The doors to the infirmary opened. Professor Snape strode out, locking the doors with a wave of his wand.

Percy steeled himself. "How is he, sir?"

Professor Snape regarded him with a black gaze. "Alive."

He walked away. Percy watched him disappear around a corner. He thought he heard the doors open again and turned back to look, but no one was there.

Frowning, Percy slowly approached the infirmary. He merely wanted to check on Harry's condition, in his role as Head Boy. He would have to rearrange the rounds if Harry was not fit for duty. Percy tapped the doors with his wand, unlocking them, then slipped in.

He saw Harry immediately. He lay on one of the beds, his grey kitten kneading his stomach. Lady Madeleine glanced at Percy, blinked, then returned to her kneading.

Percy silently approached Harry, looking him over. His skin had been pellucid in the torrential rain, but his hours in the hospital wing had returned some color.

Percy stood for a moment, watching Harry's chest rise and fall, then he took a seat. The rain had plastered Harry's hair down, and it fell across his face like a raven's wing.

A book had been left on his bedside table. Percy picked it up. *The Once and Future King*, by T.H. White. He had never heard of it before, but he knew it was a muggle book. Paperbacks, they were called.

Percy opened it to the first act, *The Sword in the Stone*. Was this about King Arthur? Curious, Percy began to read.

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays it was Court Hand and Summulae Logicales, while the rest of the week it was the Organon, Repetition and Astrology. The governess was always getting muddled with her astrolabe, and when she got specially muddled she would take it out of the Wart by rapping his knuckles...

Percy looked up at Harry. His eyelids fluttered in his sleep, his mouth was slightly open. Percy swallowed, then looked back at the book Harry had been reading. He took out his wand and tapped the book.

"*Geminio.*"

Percy set the original copy back on the bedside table. He looked at Harry one last time, then left the hospital wing, locking the doors behind him.

Severus stood in the headmaster's office, staring out of the window. Sirius Black, dementors, what next? Would the Dark Lord stride into the Great Hall and kill his son right in front of him?

"There must be some way to control them, Albus," McGonagall said. "Surely the Ministry —"

"There isn't," Burbage said.

Severus turned to look at her.

She gave him a grim smile. "It's part of the seventh year curriculum, legal studies. Prison conditions in the muggle world and magical world. The use of dementors is inhumane. Amortal creatures bred from despair." She shook her head. "The people in Azkaban aren't just there for imprisonment, but to placate the dementors."

Dumbledore sat at his desk, his expression grave. "I have made my position clear to the dementors. However, without Ministry support, it would be challenging to drive them back to Azkaban."

"So we must endure?" Severus said. "This is the second attack on a student, headmaster. On the *same* student, I might add."

Dumbledore shook his head. "They were apparently drawn by the high emotions inspired by the match. They had no intention of performing the Kiss."

"They're hungry," Burbage said darkly. "I told you this would happen"

"Indeed, Charity," Dumbledore said, turning to look at the storm still raging outside. "I have contacted the Ministry. Hopefully they can give the dementors some other occupation."

A disgusted look crossed Burbage's face, but she remained silent. Severus knew, from long experience, there often wasn't a point in arguing with Albus Dumbledore. Burbage was learning that now.

"How is Harry?" Dumbledore asked, looking at Severus.

"He will be fine," Severus said. If his son wasn't fine...

Severus turned back to the window. If dementors could be created, they could be destroyed. He would find a way.

In the middle of the night, Monty grabbed his invisibility cloak and snuck down to the infirmary. The shine of his victory had worn off almost as soon as his feet had touched the ground. He'd almost missed grabbing the snitch when he had seen that dog in the stands, but Higgs was too far behind and Monty had easily caught it. While he was celebrating that, Harry had been fighting off a horde of dementors.

He felt incredibly guilty. Rumor had it that Dumbledore was furious. All of the professors were. The Slytherin team barely heard the final score before half of them got back on their brooms and flew to the castle, ignoring Madam Hooch as she shouted at them.

Monty carefully pushed the hospital wing's doors open, glad to find them unlocked. He tiptoed through, glancing at Madam Pomfrey's dark office, then searched for Harry's bed.

"What are you doing sneaking around at this hour?" a quiet voice asked.

Monty jumped and spun around. Harry was sitting up in bed, reading a book by candlelight. His kitten was curled up on his pillow, ears twitching in her sleep. How had Monty not noticed him? He didn't even ask how Harry knew he was there. Harry always seemed to know.

"Are you alright?" he asked, pulling his cloak off.

"I will be," Harry said. "My body reacts poorly in stressful situations. I'm working on it."

Monty ran forward and threw his arms around Harry. Harry went rigid for a moment, then relaxed and hugged him back.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you," Harry said gently. "I really am fine, though. It's usually much worse."

"We won," Monty mumbled, gripping Harry tighter. "Sorry."

Harry laughed quietly. "That's what I expected to happen. Did the goggles work okay?"

Monty nodded, pulling back. His dad's old goggles. He couldn't even articulate how much they meant to him. "Where did you find them?"

"Since you *did* win, I suppose I could show you," Harry said thoughtfully. "When I get out of here."

Harry folded his legs to make room for Monty to sit.

"I missed the game," Harry said with a wry smile. "Why don't you tell me about it?"

Monty told him about the game, which hadn't been very fun. It was mostly him trying to stay on his broom. Harry told him about what happened with the dementors.

“You know, something strange did happen,” Monty said. He was sitting cross legged on Harry’s hospital bed, Lady Madeleine in his lap. “When I was going for the snitch, I thought I saw a dog in the stands. A black dog.”

Monty yawned. “Sorry,” he said, embarrassed.

“It *is* getting late,” Harry said. “Or early. You should probably go to your dormitory before you’re missed.”

Monty nodded, then climbed off of Harry’s bed. Lady Madeleine arched her back and laid down in the spot he had been. He picked up his invisibility cloak, hesitated, then gave Harry another hug.

“Night,” Monty said, throwing the cloak over himself and running off.

Harry watched the door to the infirmary open and close. When he was alone again, he wrapped his arms around himself.

He had got to hug his little brother. He only had to face down a hundred dementors, but it was worth it.

Harry sighed, then lowered his head. Monty had seen a dog, that same dog from Diagon Alley based on his description. Any dog that attended a quidditch game was noteworthy, but one they had seen before? That was no coincidence.

Lupin had said dementors didn’t have as strong an effect on animals as humans. He was curious about how they affected other creatures, but that was irrelevant at the moment. Animals had less complex brains than humans. Simpler emotions. Some humans could turn into animals.

If Sirius Black was an animagus—a black dog, no less—that left Harry with even more questions. If that dog in Diagon Alley was Sirius Black, why hadn’t he attacked Monty? If Sirius Black was an animagus, would Lupin know that? Would he have told the headmaster? If Sirius Black was an animagus, could he not have escaped from Azkaban at any point in the past twelve years? Why now?

It didn’t add up.

Either Sirius Black wasn’t an animagus, or he *was* and...what? Surely the professors must have considered a possible animagus. Hogwarts had one on the staff.

Harry's first idea was to tell his dad. But his dad hated Sirius Black, to an almost irrational extent. It was more than his betrayal of Harry's mum. Something had happened while his dad was in school, something his dad refused to talk about. There would be no benign motives assigned to the dog approaching them in Diagon Alley, or stopping by Hogwarts to catch a quidditch game.

He ran a hand through his hair, frustrated. How did people know Sirius Black was the secret-keeper? Who would be so stupid to spread that around? His mum had taken it to the grave. He knew, he had *felt* it when she died.

Harry shivered. He hadn't understood what it meant at the time, the sudden knowledge that he had the power to tell people where he lived, that he held that secret in his very soul. He had only been three-years-old, had only known something terrible had happened.

The dementors had made him remember.

Being an animagus would explain how Sirius Black got past the dementors, but nothing else. His dad would call it specious.

A small sound startled Harry out of his thoughts. He looked around the hospital wing, then took out his wand.

"Homenum revelio," he whispered.

Harry waited for a long time, but nothing happened.

Hearts and Flowers

Chapter Summary

November 1993

Chapter Notes

"He's only silent because he's too thick to string two words together." - Fred Weasley on Cedric Diggory (PoA pg. 127)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Monty carefully slid the knife down the groove of his crocodile heart. The membranes needed to be removed, otherwise the potion would take several additional hours to brew. It was the Monday after the match with Slytherin, and Harry was still in hospital.

That day, they were working on brewing the Calming Draught. Monty had helped Harry brew it for the hospital wing over summer holiday and had learned a lot about it. An improperly prepared crocodile heart altered the brewing time, which would make the potion more or less concentrated. Too much peppermint oil could cause hysteria. Harry had explained there was some room for improvisation in potions, if you knew what you were doing. If you didn't, the results could be disastrous, even deadly.

Professor Snape had been eerily silent during class, watching them from his desk or stalking between the cauldrons. Monty knew that Harry was one of Snape's favorite students, and that he had been the one to find him after he had fought off the dementors. He still felt guilty for playing quidditch while Harry was in danger, but Harry had brushed him off and said he had only been doing his job as a prefect. It had been their responsibility to make sure nothing happened during the match. But the dementors would not have been at Hogwarts if not for Sirius Black, and Sirius Black wouldn't have been at Hogwarts if not for Monty.

A few people had not picked up on Snape's bad humor.

Monty clenched his teeth as Draco Malfoy did another terrible imitation of a dementor. His arm was out of the sling now, though Monty didn't know what precipitated the change. He was tempted to dare Malfoy to walk up to a dementor and see how well he did. Malfoy had also been complaining about the Slytherin seeker, Terence Higgs, and the captain, Astrid Urquhart. Monty thought they both did rather well. Higgs was a much better flier than Malfoy, and didn't just follow Monty around, taunting him. And Urquhart was an excellent keeper. Gryffindor had only won by twenty points.

“He really is a mudblood now,” Malfoy said to his unfortunate potions partner, Goyle. The other Slytherins were pretending nothing was going on, other than Vincent Crabbe and Pansy Parkinson, the latter of whom would squeal at almost anything Malfoy said. “I heard he fainted in the mud. A mudblood in the mud! How could they tell the difference?”

“Ten points from Slytherin, Malfoy,” Professor Snape said, almost sounding bored. “You know how the headmaster feels about that sort of language.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Malfoy said with an oily smile.

“You alright, mate?” Ron whispered to him.

Monty nodded, taking even breaths. He glanced at Malfoy’s table, and saw Malfoy’s crocodile heart sitting untouched. Monty slowly took his wand from his robes.

“What are you doing?” Ron hissed.

“Remember that spell Professor Lupin used on Peeves?” Monty whispered back.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “What, are you going to use it on Malfoy?”

“Just watch,” Monty said. He pointed his wand at Malfoy’s crocodile heart and muttered, “*Waddiwasi*,” then pointed at Malfoy’s open mouth. The crocodile heart shot from the table into Malfoy’s mouth, gagging him

Parkinson screamed. Goyle was attempting to help somehow, but Malfoy was slapping him away, trying to spit the heart out. Crabbe edged away from the flailing Malfoy. Most of the Gryffindors were trying to hide their laughter, except Hermione. She shot Monty a suspicious look.

“What is going on?” Snape asked. He had been examining Neville’s work, and looked over just in time to see Malfoy spit the crocodile heart out into his potion. Malfoy’s face was red and blotchy, and he turned his furious, watery gaze onto Monty.

“No eating in class, Mr. Malfoy,” Snape said, walking over to look into Malfoy’s cauldron. “I’m afraid that’s another ten points. I see you’ve neglected to remove the membrane from your crocodile heart. This potion will not be ready by the time class ends.”

“It was him!” Malfoy said, pointing at Monty. “It’s Potter’s fault, sir!”

“Are you suggesting my eyes have deceived me?” Snape asked, crossing his arms. “That I did not just witness you *spit* a crocodile heart into your cauldron? Was it, perhaps, a figment of my imagination? Not only have you prolonged the brewing time, but you have contaminated this potion with your saliva. It is not fit for human consumption.”

Snape waved his hand and Malfoy’s potion vanished. Malfoy’s jaw dropped. The room had gone completely silent. “Work with Goyle. You will be graded based on the quality of *his* potion. And detention with Mr. Filch for wasting my time.”

With that, Snape walked back to Neville, who gawked at Snape like he had never seen him before. Monty turned to look at Ron, stunned by the turn of events.

“That was brilliant!” Ron whispered excitedly. “I’ve never seen Snape like that with one of the Slytherins.”

Monty shared a smile with him, then went back to carefully preparing his own crocodile heart the way Harry had shown him.

Harry turned another page, rubbing his eyes. Madam Pomfrey had wanted to keep him in the infirmary all weekend, with the promise he would be released Monday. It was Monday evening, though, and he was still there.

Madam Pomfrey had begrudgingly allowed his friends to visit on Sunday, then barred them after Jasmine had charmed his bedding and curtains black. Astrid had been distraught, both by the dementors and Slytherin’s loss. Adrian had wanted the gory details, but it was hard for Harry to describe what it had been like. He hadn’t even known so many dementors had been dispatched around Hogwarts.

Standing in the freezing rain, lit only by the flash of lightning, choked by an unearthly silence. Cadaverous creatures, twelve feet tall in tattered, funereal shrouds. Row after row, gliding over the darkened grounds in sepulchral procession. Their gnarled, rotting hands reaching for him. Grey, pitted faces, rough indentations where their eyes should have been. The impenetrable void of their gaping, glistening maws. The piercing cold of their breath, stealing away his thoughts, his feelings, his magic. And the memories. Every horrible thing that had happened to him, clawing at his mind. Knowing it was only him, that he would be an empty husk before help arrived. Only him and a thin stick of wood to fight off the inevitable embrace of despair.

Did saying it was *scary* suffice?

After his friends had left, Madam Pomfrey had changed the bedding and curtains back to white.

Harry closed his book. Reading could only distract him so much. He hadn’t died. He had fought, and he had survived. Holding off so many dementors was *impressive*. He laughed bitterly at the thought of getting another award for services to the school. He hoped they wouldn’t bother.

The doors to the infirmary opened. It was Cedric, walking in with a smile and a flower.

“Cedric?” Harry asked. “What are you doing here?”

“Visiting you,” Cedric said happily. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” Harry said. “Actually, I’m rather tired. I was about to go to sleep.”

“I got this for you,” Cedric said, holding out the flower.

It was a white asphodel. A cone of white, six-petaled flowers with dark red veins, six white stamens fanning out like stars. A lily. A grave flower.

“Where did you get this?” Harry asked, taking the stem between two fingers.

“Professor Sprout said I could have a clipping from one of the greenhouses,” Cedric said. “This one reminded me of you.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. Powdered root of asphodel was an ingredient in Draught of Living Death, that was why Professor Sprout was growing it. He looked up at Cedric. “I’m not a fan of cut flowers, but I appreciate the thought.”

Cedric’s shoulders fell. He was as handsome dispirited as he was when happy.

Harry had no interest in Cedric’s appearance. He didn’t feel like swooning. He felt like throwing up.

“I really ought to get some sleep,” Harry said, setting the altogether inappropriate flower down on his bedside table. “Have a nice night, Cedric.”

“Oh, okay,” Cedric said, smiling at him again. “I hope you get better soon.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. He watched Cedric walk out of the hospital wing. He would have to talk to Madam Pomfrey about who was allowed to visit him. After a moment, he vanished the flower.

Harry’s first day back made him wish he had stayed in the infirmary like Madam Pomfrey wanted. Not a single person had seen his confrontation with the dementors, and yet the entire school knew about it. A few had seen his dad carrying him off. He hadn’t spoken to his dad yet, but Harry knew he was angry. The atmosphere around the professors was generally somber.

It was like fourth year all over again. People staring, pointing, gossiping.

“Don’t they have anything better to do?” Astrid growled. She had been divested of her usual seat next to him during meals. Luna had tried following him around to class all day, only to be hauled off by different Ravenclaw prefects, but managed to squeeze in next to Harry at the Slytherin table. On his other side, astonishingly, was Jason Mulciber. The boy hadn’t said a single word and was stoically eating his dinner.

“At least Malfoy’s given up his dementor impression,” Terence said. “If he wanted an actual shot at being seeker, he should have given up faking that injury sooner.”

“It’s not funny,” Jason muttered.

Harry turned to look at him. “What isn’t?”

Jason frowned at his plate. “Dementors. It’s not funny.”

“No, it’s not,” Jasmine said, giving Harry a significant look. He looked at Jason again. Jason Mulciber. There was a Mulciber in Azkaban. Jason’s father? If so, Jason’s mother would have been pregnant with him shortly before his father was arrested.

“They won’t get onto the grounds again,” Harry said with more confidence than he felt. The dementors would do what they wanted.

Luna leaned around him to address Jason. “Sometimes Harry sings, and it makes me feel better.”

“Oh, god,” Harry muttered, deciding it was about time he started eating.

Jason looked scandalized.

“If any of you tell anyone,” Harry said darkly, glaring specifically at Adrian who looked fit to burst, “it will be the last thing you ever do.”

“So cute,” Phoebe gushed.

“I can sing too,” Jasmine said loftily.

“You can?” Adrian asked, turning to her.

“Yes,” Jasmine said. She sang, “*Ça fait rire les oiseaux, ça fait chanter les abeilles. Ça chasse les nuages et fait briller le soleil.*”

Adrian stared at her, until Astrid kicked him under the table.

“I’ve never heard that song,” Luna said.

Jason shrugged. “It was okay.”

Harry laughed at Jasmine’s pout. “High praise.”

It was easy to pretend that everything was normal. Harry could still laugh with his friends, still finish his essays, still act like a prefect. His dad was aloof and distracted, by what Harry

couldn't say. Sometimes Harry worried it was his fault. He was too weak, too sick, too much effort. They still met some evenings to work on Harry's occlumency and legilimency. In fact, his dad was pushing him harder.

Things weren't normal, though. Harry knew he wasn't doing very well. His nightmares had started again. Memories that had faded with time felt like they had happened the day before. Things he had forgotten. His gran's papery skin, the bad breath he did his best to ignore. Helping her get her shoes on, trying to carry her weight as she moved from room to room. Waking up in the middle of the night, crying for a reason he didn't understand, his gran bursting into the room and grabbing him, terrifying him with her heartbroken sobs.

Death stalked him. The explosion that killed his grandfather, he remembered that day vividly. The whole town had been shaken, dozens of lives lost. The thick, cloying stench of burning plastic and burning bodies that lingered for months. His mum. His gran. Quirrell. The basilisk. And now dementors, who killed the soul but left the body behind.

Harry had taken to wearing his mum's cloak on his prefect rounds. The nights were getting longer and colder. He always felt cold.

"I believe the curse is tied to an object," Dumbledore said.

Severus was sitting down in the headmaster's office. It was necessary as he, along with the headmaster and Lupin, were working on their *fun little project*. Pieces of parchment and paper were strewn across Dumbledore's desk, covered in runes, numerals, and bizarre alchemical symbols only Dumbledore understood.

"Why do you say that, headmaster?" Lupin asked. He was looking healthier than he had at the start of the year, with regular access to food and healing. Despite the premature aging caused by his lycanthropy, Lupin was still young and handsome.

"Process of elimination," Severus said. "There are only so many ways to effectuate a curse that spans decades. And, unless you possess knowledge of the dark arts I do not, cursing an abstract concept such as *the position of Hogwarts Defense professor* should not be possible. The magic has to attach to an individual through some means."

"The simplest means," Dumbledore said, smiling at Lupin, "is an object."

"It could be anything," Lupin said. "I can't think of something at Hogwarts only I would have access to. My quarters?"

"It's a place to start," Severus allowed. "Better than running around like chickens with our heads cut off. Or strangled by—"

"Thank you, Severus," Dumbledore said.

Lupin tapped his quill idly. "Should we bring in more people? I don't profess to be an expert in runes. Surely Bathsheda would be better suited to this."

"There are few I would trust with this matter," Dumbledore said. "Only the other heads of house know of Lord Voldemort's diary."

"And the Weasleys," Severus added. "Lucius Malfoy."

Dumbledore sighed. "Owing to their involvement, yes."

Severus looked down at the equation he had been working on. It looked like a garbled mess, but confirmed that the curse had been placed on an object. If not what kind, or where.

Burbage was proficient in arithmancy.

Severus scowled, then found a fresh piece of parchment to begin anew.

Percy left Penelope at their table in the library, with the promise he would soon be back. His vision was starting to blur, and he was immensely thirsty. He could already feel the effects of the love potion dwindling, the constant chant of *Penelope Clearwater, Penelope Clearwater, Penelope Clearwater* but a fading echo.

He felt sickened and bereft whenever he came down, the incongruous lust that thudded through him at the thought, sight, smell, *taste* of Penelope Clearwater blown away like dead leaves, only leaving their impression in the dirt.

Lust, infatuation, obsession. Simulacrams. He doubted Penelope cared what his actual feelings were towards her, so long as he acted the part. Relationships were contractual in her world. Quid pro quo. It was simpler. Formulaic. He knew the rules. He merely needed to abide by them.

He went to the Restricted Section. Claiming he needed a book from it would buy him some more time.

It was a mistake.

Percy turned down an aisle and froze. Harry was standing there, his head bowed over a book, lit by a shaft of golden light that danced with motes of dust. Harry looked over at him. He had violet shadows under his eyes, like a bruised petal.

"Am I in your way?" Harry asked.

Percy kept staring at him.

“Percy?” Harry asked, closing the book and putting it back on the shelf. Harry walked towards him. “Are you feeling okay?”

“I am perfectly fine,” Percy said automatically.

“Yeah, that was *very* convincing,” Harry said. Harry reached into his robes and pulled out what appeared to be chocolate. “Here. You look like you could use something to eat.”

Percy took the chocolate.

“Eating and drinking are not allowed in the library,” he said.

Harry snorted, then, to Percy’s horror, Harry took his arm. “I have chocolate from Honeydukes too, if that’s what you need.”

Percy numbly let Harry direct him towards a table, where Harry’s things were. Stacks of books, rolls of parchment, his toy thestral. A forest green cloak.

He looked at the chocolate he had been given.

“Mars?” he asked.

Harry grinned at him. “It’s my favorite. For muggle chocolates, at least. Madam Pomfrey made sure to stock up on chocolate because of the dementors, as you know.”

Percy nodded. Harry had sent him a Mars bar before.

“I liked the Bounty,” Percy said, sitting in the chair Harry pulled out for him.

Harry chuckled. “Figures. I can’t stand it. It’s the coconut.”

“That was the best part,” Percy said. He absently rubbed his chest. It felt strangely sore.

“If I get any, I’ll make sure to save them for you,” Harry said. He conjured a goblet, one stamped with an occamy reared back as if to strike, and filled it with water.

“I’ve read about your condition,” Harry said quietly. “It isn’t exactly easy to find literature on a condition with so few confirmed cases.”

“No,” Percy agreed.

“I know being Head Boy is a lot of work, and that you’ve got N.E.W.T.s coming up,” Harry went on, “but you still need to take care of yourself.”

He pushed the goblet into Percy’s hand. He had no choice but to take it.

“Drink,” Harry said, sitting down to watch him, his head propped in a hand, smiling in that knowing way.

“If you insist,” Percy said. Madam Pomfrey had ultimately increased his dosage of litorin. If he didn’t take the potion, he had too much in his system. It began metabolizing his own

magic. The water Harry had conjured was cool and sweet. It slaked the painful thirst he had felt.

“The chocolate, too,” Harry said. “It wasn’t until I saw them for myself that I knew we had dozens of dementors, at least a hundred, surrounding the school. It makes everything just a little worse.”

Percy nodded, unwrapping the Mars bar. He broke off a small piece, watched the caramel stretch then break, curling back into itself. It was Harry’s favorite, and he had given it to Percy. “Thank you.”

“I am merely acting within my duties as a prefect,” Harry said with a smirk.

Percy blushed. “Nevertheless, it is appreciated. I hadn’t realized how poorly I felt. What are you working on?” He broke off another piece of the Mars bar.

“My term paper for Transfiguration,” Harry said. “On *inanimatus conjurus*-type spells.”

“You needed the Restricted Section for that?” Percy asked.

“I didn’t need it,” Harry said, glancing at him. “I wanted it.”

Percy took another sip of water.

“You have selected a large number of books,” Percy observed, looking at the spines. *The Once and Future King* sat on one stack, on top of *The Provenance of Magick*. How was that relevant to Harry’s term paper? Most of the books weren’t even in English. “How many languages do you speak?”

“One,” Harry said with a laugh. Percy enjoyed the sound of Harry’s laugh. He couldn’t remember the last time he had laughed. “I’ve picked up a few words and phrases here and there, and I can at least pronounce things. But, no, just one.”

Harry held up a book to show Percy the cover. “I’m working on Welsh. Professor Lupin’s helping me.”

“I see,” Percy said, looking down at the Mars bar. There was still some left. He put it in his pocket for later and stood to leave. “Well, I don’t wish to keep you from your studies.”

“What were you looking for?” Harry asked.

Percy’s mind went blank. “I was taking a turn about the library.”

“Oh?” Harry said, raising an eyebrow.

“Thank you for your assistance. I hope you enjoy the rest of your afternoon.”

“You as well, Head Boy Weasley,” Harry said, smiling faintly.

Percy left before he could say or do anything idiotic. He passed through the aisle he had found Harry in. The book Harry was looking at jutted from the shelf. Curious, Percy pulled it out.

Moste Potente Potions. Why was Harry looking through it?

He flipped it open, scanning the contents. His eyes immediately caught on one particular potion.

Amortentia.

Percy stared at the recipe for a moment, calculating the cost of ingredients. He then shut the book and put it back on the shelf, wiping his palms off on his robes.

He was fine. He was *perfectly* fine.

He pulled a small vial from his robes, taking a measured sip. He had to get back to Penelope Clearwater.

Monty snuck out of the common room as the prefect returning came back in. Harry had promised to show him where he had got the goggles from, but it had been a few weeks. Monty had seen the shadows under Harry's eyes when he was released from the hospital wing. He had only a vestige of what it felt like to confront a dementor. The cold. The distant sound of a woman screaming. Vague impressions his mind couldn't quite grasp. Harry had fought a hundred of them. Monty couldn't imagine what that must have felt like, what that would do to someone. They said people in Azkaban went mad for it.

Harry had seemed alright in the infirmary, but Monty knew it was easy to seem alright. No one ever suspected what the Dursleys did to him. They didn't look at him and think *that boy sleeps in a locked cupboard*.

Still, he missed Harry, and was curious. Monty crept through the corridors, knowing Harry had been on patrol on the seventh floor that evening. And there Harry was, standing at the end of one corridor. Lady Madeleine was rolling on the floor with what looked like a snake, and Harry was absorbed by a book. He closed it, then looked directly at Monty.

"Are you ready?" Harry asked softly. Strangely, he began pacing back and forth in front of a wall. On the third turn, a door appeared.

"Whoa," Monty said, taking off his invisibility cloak. "What is it?"

"A secret," Harry said with a mischievous smile. He turned the door knob, and Monty looked around him to peer inside. He couldn't believe his eyes. "Promise not to tell?"

Chapter End Notes

The song Jasmine sings is [Ça fait rire les oiseaux](#) by La Compagnie Créole.

The words are, "It makes the birds laugh, it makes the bees sing. It chases away the clouds and makes the sun shine."

Happy New Year!

Hippogriff Manure

Chapter Summary

November 1993

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry shut the door behind them. “So, what do you think?”

Monty was still in shock. He had never seen an indoor space so huge. There were piles and piles of things everywhere. The ceiling was so high he was surprised he didn’t see clouds.

“What is this place?” Monty asked.

“It’s called the Room of Requirement,” Harry said. “This specific room is the Room of Lost Things, I think.”

Monty turned to look at him. “This specific room?”

“The room becomes whatever you need it to be,” Harry said. “Within limits. I haven’t tested it all yet, but I doubt it could provide something not already in the castle. I think it takes what it can from this room. For example, if you needed a broom and walked past the door thinking about it, it would turn into a broom cupboard. If you were hungry, I don’t think it would magically make food. You could walk down to the kitchens for that.”

Monty nodded, still fascinated by how many things there were. “How long do you think it’s been here?”

“From the beginning, I’d guess,” Harry said, taking out his wand. “Maybe the house-elves know. There could be a thousand years worth of things people have lost in here. Anyway, watch this. *Accio brooms!*”

There was a low rumble, and Monty looked around in concern. Harry turned to smile at him.

“You might want to duck.”

The *Daily Prophet*, in a break from what had become the norm, didn't have Sirius Black on the front page. Instead, they announced the reintroduction of the Werewolf Code of Conduct.

"Werewolves are required to sign the code of conduct if they wish to be gainfully employed and have a permit to purchase Wolfsbane Potion," Harry read. "Those are the same thing now. Let me take a wild guess at whose idea this was. Oh, color me surprised. Dolores Jane Umbridge."

Adrian groaned. "Can we just eat breakfast in peace?"

"Who cares?" Jason asked from his side. "They're monsters."

Cassius snorted, shuffling his tarot cards. "Here we go."

"There are kids your age who are werewolves," Harry told Jason. "They're just like everyone else, except one day out of the month when they get really sick. It's not their fault someone bit them and gave them a disease."

Jason shrugged and turned back to his food.

Harry flipped through the rest of the *Prophet*, reading to himself. There was a blip about the Muggle Protection Act finally passing, the vote having been further delayed due to the Ministry effectively shutting down.

"And yet they had the time to pass the Lycanthropic Laborers Act," Harry muttered. He put the paper aside to read later, then looked over to the Ravenclaw table, where Percy was sitting next to Penelope. It didn't bother him.

"It's bound to fail," Harry said, raising his voice. "For the same reason it failed the last time they tried. Three hundred years and there is still no motivation for people with lycanthropy to put themselves on a list."

"But then we would know who they all are," Jason said, pushing his eggs around.

"They're treating them like criminals," Harry said gently. "Before they've even done anything wrong. They already have to deal with having lycanthropy, which is really painful and scary."

Jason shrugged again.

"Barking," Harry said, shaking his head.

"The werewolves?" Adrian asked.

"Oh, piss off and eat your beans," Harry said.

Adrian stuck his tongue out, demonstrating he was doing just that.

"Disgusting," Harry said, picking up his coffee. "It suits you."

Percy checked his pocket watch, then stepped over the useless velvet rope separating the main library from the Restricted Section. He had thought about it, considered his options, and come to a conclusion. It was near curfew, so he didn't have much time.

He walked quickly to the correct aisle. He pulled *Moste Potente Potions* from the shelf and carried it to one of the few study carrels. He sat down, and began copying the potion.

Halfway through, someone walked by.

"Percy?"

He looked over his shoulder and saw Harry, books floating all around him. His typically neat hair was a frustrated mess, and his eyes glittered like the night sky. Percy had never seen anyone so magical in his entire life. Harry lived and breathed it.

"Last minute studying?" Harry asked.

Percy pushed up his glasses. "Yes."

Harry nodded and moved on, walking down an aisle. Percy watched him for a moment, for too long, then looked in the direction Harry had come from. He grabbed his parchment and quill and quickly walked over.

Harry had set up at the same table, and had a number of books to put back. Percy looked around, flipped his parchment over, and began copying titles. He wasn't convinced all of this was for a term paper one could write by only referencing the assigned text. He heard footsteps approaching and darted into an aisle, his heart pounding. After he got his breathing under control, he returned to the study carrel, checking his pocket watch again. He sat down and finished copying the instructions, returning the book before he could see Harry again. It would only make him want to change his mind, and he had his rounds in the dungeons that night.

Harry watched Percy all but run out of the Restricted Section. He walked to the spot where Percy had got a book from, trailing his fingers over the spines. He grabbed one that stood out, *Moste Potente Potions*. He sighed and slid it back on the shelf. Percy was probably just doing N.E.W.T. revision. He was the type to have started already.

Harry wrapped his arms around himself and walked back to his table. He'd reduced the gobstones meetings from four hours a night to two. Normally they did a mix of playing gobstones and homework, but Harry needed more time in the library. He wished he could

skive off classes and spend all of his time in the library, but he was a prefect and needed to keep up appearances.

He did wish Percy hadn't been in such a rush. Harry wanted to talk to him about the Werewolf Code of Conduct, the Muggle Protection Act, Sirius Black, the new Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects directed by Percy's dad. Anything. Everything.

Harry's friends were great. He liked how different they all were. They all had their own interests, and it was never boring talking to them. There was the possible exception of quidditch, but listening to Astrid talk about it made even that thrilling.

He understood why they might not want to talk about current events every day, or even on a regular basis. Hogwarts stood apart from the rest of the magical world. They were insulated as students, to some extent. Cassius and Adrian got enough of it at home, with family members involved in both domestic and international magical affairs. Astrid cared more about quidditch and the people in her life than the rest of the world. Jasmine had an almost neurotic aversion to the news. Phoebe was in her own world. Terence just wanted to be a teenager. They all did.

Harry sat down in his chair, shutting his eyes tight. He missed having breakfast with his dad. Actually *with* his dad, and not just in the same room. He was always teaching, or marking papers, or in the headmaster's office, or busy brewing potions. And Harry had his school work, his prefect duties, his upcoming O.W.L.s.

He knew Percy made the patrol schedule. He knew that Percy never had them doing rounds on the same floor. It felt personal. Harry didn't understand what had changed. What he had done wrong.

He dropped his head onto the desk, looking at where Benjy lay insensate. He wished there was a *be a thestral* spell to make the little death horse work again.

Harry sat bolt upright. That was it. Layering charms would work for a time, but they would be disparate, out of sync, not a cohesive whole. They had to work together, like any functional system. He'd been foolishly looking at it piecewise.

He pulled the remaining books over to him. There wasn't a single book in the library that gave instructions on how to create a spell. Harry suspected most people who created spells said a bunch of words while waving their wands around, trying to brute force it.

What he needed was a charm. A charm that would give something the *essence* of a thestral, its qualities. He jumped up and rushed into the stacks. He needed to know *everything* about thestrals.

Severus opened one of his potions cabinets and frowned. He was running low on moonstone. He'd have to order more. The problem was he should not have been running low on moonstone. He shut the cabinet. He doubted anyone else in the castle was brewing Wolfsbane, so he eliminated those ingredients. There were plenty of unicorn horns and porcupine quills, ruling out the Draught of Peace. A student was behind it—his colleagues would ask, or purchase their own ingredients—which meant the potion was something a teenager might brew.

A love potion.

Smirking, Severus picked up a half-empty bottle of pearl dust, grade six. Pixie dust was also depleted. Swan feathers, mallowsweet, infusion of wormwood...

Someone was brewing Amortentia.

That would be easy to identify, and painfully obvious to anyone around the victim. When Severus caught the perpetrator, he would take great pleasure in snapping their wand himself.

There was a knock on his door.

"Come in," he said, shutting the cabinet.

"It's just me," Harry said, locking the door behind him. "How are you?"

"Busy," Severus said. "I need to make Lupin's potion."

"May I help?" Harry asked.

Severus looked his son over. He was paler than usual, and looked like he hadn't been sleeping. He'd been giving Harry mild sleeping potions, not wanting to resort to Dreamless Sleep. Perhaps he would add developing a Nightmareless Sleep potion to his ever-growing list of things to do, right after wiping dementors off the face of the planet and indulging the headmaster's whims.

"Of course you may," he said. "I have deduced that someone is brewing Amortentia in the castle."

A strange expression crossed Harry's face. "That's terrible."

"Yes," Severus said. "Keep an eye out for any signs."

Harry nodded, then walked to the cabinets to help gather ingredients.

"How have you been?" Severus asked. He had only seen his son during meals or during class lately, and one or two nights a week to work on Harry's occlumency and legilimency. His son was becoming frighteningly competent with the former, otherwise Severus might have a better idea of how he was actually doing.

"I'm fine," Harry said, his back still turned.

“No one is ever being honest when they say that,” Severus said, crossing his arms. “You needn’t be circumspect regarding your personal wellbeing. Not with me.”

Harry glanced over his shoulder. “What are you working on with the headmaster?”

“A way to break the curse on the Defense post,” he said easily. “By what means, I am not entirely sure.”

Harry nodded, turning back to the cabinet. “I want to fix Benjy. I had...an epiphany, I suppose you could say. I’m not sure if it’s right, though.”

Severus began sorting through the moonstones. “How has your sleep been?”

“What sleep?” Harry mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Not good,” his son said, setting bottles down next to him and moving towards a door. There was a small grow room attached to Severus’ personal lab where some of the more illicit plants were kept. Including an adult mandrake, which took up a considerable amount of space. Harry grabbed a pair of earmuffs and shut the door behind him.

Severus sighed. Occlumency should have, theoretically, allowed Harry some rest while he slept. It was too much to ask of a fifteen-year-old boy to suppress his emotions during the day and the night, though. Harry needed some outlet. Something other than gobstones and broken toys.

Harry opened the door again, removing his earmuffs and producing two fleshy mandrake leaves. “Bit mardy, that one.”

Severus chuckled despite himself. “I agree.”

Harry looked at him in surprise.

“What is it?” Severus asked.

“You’ve been upset lately,” he said, taking a mortar and pestle down from a shelf.

“Yes, seeing your son passed out after fighting off a horde of dementors tends to have that effect,” he said drily.

Harry briefly looked stricken, then schooled his face. “I’m sorry.”

Severus frowned at him. “What for?”

Harry was silent for a moment as he began grinding the mandrake leaves into a paste. “I wouldn’t have got sick if I was better.”

“Better at what?” he asked. “Surely you don’t believe I’m upset with you?”

Harry's lips thinned, but he didn't respond.

Severus looked at the moonstones arrayed before him, waiting to be crushed into powder. "Harry, there is no situation in which I would blame you for what happened. I am upset with various entities. The Ministry, the dementors, the headmaster. Myself. Not you."

Harry nodded stiffly, but still didn't speak. Severus covered his eyes, frustrated. He doubted there would be an immediate fix to whatever was going on. There was too much of it, so much out of their control.

Did Harry need someone to talk to? How many people in the world could the boy even be honest with? Was it comfort? Advice? If he asked Harry, he knew he would get another *I'm fine*, or something equivalent.

Making a decision, Severus walked over and put a hand on his son's shoulder. If anything, this surprised Harry more than his laughter.

Severus gritted his teeth and asked, "Would you like a...hug?"

Harry looked at him with wide eyes, then started laughing. Embarrassed, Severus pulled back, but Harry turned towards him and gave him a brief hug.

"Thanks, dad," Harry said, turning back to the leaves. "I know you don't really like being touched. Or touching people, for that matter. We should work on the potion, though."

"Right," Severus said, turning back to the moonstones. When did Harry intuit that about him?

It was another thing his son was an exception to, his willingness to touch others. Children, it seemed, held a very unique place in their parents' worlds.

It hadn't seemed that way with his own father. Severus had felt like a stranger who lived with him. A stranger who ate his father's food and took up his space, who his father would have preferred out of sight, out of mind. An ungrateful mouth to feed.

"When you're done extracting the juice from the mandrake leaves, please get the occamy eggs."

"Okay," Harry said. "I wish you would let me incubate one. Phoebe would lose her shit."

"I have already received, and rejected, Miss Alderton's proposal to change the team name," Severus said. "If you agree to assist me in making this potion for the remainder of the year, I will consider it. And the incubation of one egg."

Harry stopped crushing the mandrake leaves and smiled at him. A genuine smile. It made Severus feel something. Lighter.

"It's a deal."

Harry did not want to go to the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw game. He did anyway.

“Who are you rooting for?” Phoebe asked. “Now that Diggory’s out of the picture.”

“He keeps running back in,” Harry muttered. Louder, he said, “I hope they both lose.”

“Unlikely,” Cassius said, looking up at the sky. It was cloudless and the sun was bright, but the wind was biting. “There hasn’t been a double elimination game since 1368. Both seekers, and the golden snidget, were killed in a collision.”

“Those were the days,” Astrid said wistfully. “When women played quidditch and golden snidgets were crushed.”

“You could transfigure a snitch to look like a snidget,” Harry said. “It’s not all hopeless.”

Astrid sighed, then sat upright. “There they are.”

Harry looked at the pitch, where the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw teams were spreading out.

“Looks like Diggory’s got a type,” Jasmine whispered from behind him.

Harry frowned, watching as Cedric walked up to Cho Chang and shook her hand. Controlling his emotions was coming easier. He barely registered the nausea as he realized there were similarities between him and Cho Chang. Dark hair, light skin, slender. Cho Chang could even be described as a tomboy, in Cedric’s words. At a distance, it was hard to make out their facial expressions, but it wasn’t a stretch to conclude Cho Chang was part of the crowd who fancied Cedric. He’d seen them interact enough times to deduce as much.

Cho Chang would probably get along splendidly with Amos Diggory.

“You never did talk to us much about what happened with Cedric,” Jasmine said.

“Harry doesn’t have to talk about anything,” Astrid said sharply. “Diggory’s a git and a loser, end of story.”

“We had irreconcilable differences,” Harry said.

“Shite shag,” Adrian said knowingly.

Harry kept his face neutral, but inside he cringed. He would never, not with Cedric. He doubted Cedric had the same idea as him of how it would even go.

“Boys,” Phoebe said, shaking her head. “They only think about one thing, and that’s—”

“Quidditch,” Astrid said. “Take enough bludgers to the head, Pucey, and that’s all you’ll ever think about again.”

Adrian laughed, leaning back in his seat.

“The game’s started,” Terence said. “Maybe Harry will get his wish, if Chang keeps flying like that.”

Harry sought out the two seekers. Chang had changed up her style. She wasn’t merely marking Cedric, she was blocking him, forcing him to change directions.

“She’s going to get injured like that,” Cassius said, still looking at the empty sky. “Perhaps not in this game.”

“It’d make my life easier,” Terence said.

“Just plow through her,” Astrid said. “Our quaffle game is better, we can afford the foul.”

“You’re starting to sound like Flint,” Terence said.

“I’m not encouraging you to foul,” Astrid said, rolling her eyes. “Just don’t shy away from it. If she’s in your way, make *her* move.”

“Aye, captain,” Terence said, mock saluting her.

“Chaser Davies scores again,” Lee Jordan announced. “That’s thirty-to-zero, Ravenclaw.”

Harry took out a book. The way both teams were playing, it was going to be a long game.

The game ended late in the afternoon. The sun was beginning to set as Harry and his friends walked back to the castle.

“Three hundred eighty to one hundred,” Astrid said gleefully. “That’s it for Hufflepuff, they don’t stand a chance. Absolutely flattened!”

“Hey, Evans!”

Harry turned around and saw Draco walking with Vince and Greg. Vince gave him a shy wave.

“What?” Harry asked.

“How do you like your boyfriend losing?” Draco said with a nasty smile.

He stopped walking, watching Draco approach. “He’s not my boyfriend.” Before Draco could respond, he added, “How would you like a week of detention with the man whose hippogriff your father’s trying to kill?”

Draco gave him an incredulous look. “You can’t do that!”

“I can, actually,” Harry said. “Watch yourself, Malfoy, or you’ll be spending your nights shoveling hippogriff shit.”

“How dare you,” Draco growled. “You...you...”

“Go on,” Adrian said, throwing his arm across Harry’s shoulders. “Say it.”

Draco flushed bright red then stormed off. Greg hurried after him, but Vince hesitated, staying back to walk with Tracey and Millie instead.

Adrian snorted. “Gobshite.”

“Chickenshit,” Astrid added.

“Ten points to Slytherin,” Harry said.

Adrian pulled back. “Are you allowed to do that?”

Harry laughed and began walking again. “No, but don’t tell Malfoy that. I want to see the look on his face when I award Longbottom points.”

One of the trickier aspects of brewing Wolfsbane was it taking a full two weeks, and thereafter had to be kept at a consistent temperature for a week. Harry couldn’t help his dad every night, and knew his help wasn’t strictly needed, but he was there as often as he could be.

The blue mass, the quicksilver pills he made, were added last. Dividing each pill into seven equal pieces was a chore.

Harry dropped one such piece into the silver goblet he held, watching it dissolve in the thick potion. It began to steam, then bubble, little puffs of blue smoke escaping when a bubble popped.

Harry bid his dad goodnight, then carried the goblet to Professor Lupin.

“Ah, Harry,” Lupin said when he entered his office. “My nightcap. How kind of you.”

Harry smiled at him, setting down the goblet.

“*A oes genny ch chi fwy o gwestiynau?*” Lupin asked.

“*Nac oes,*” Harry said. “I think I can manage. I’ve decided to go in another direction for now. That text was too philosophical.”

Lupin chuckled. "I'm not surprised. Are you looking forward to the Christmas holidays?"

Harry and Lupin exchanged small talk while Lupin drew out his consumption of the potion, then Harry carried the goblet down to his dad's office. He was out, so Harry left the goblet in its usual cabinet. Lady Madeleine was sitting on top of his bag, guarding it.

"Thank you, my Lady," Harry said, picking up his bag. "Hopefully Cedric is too busy moping about his loss to hunt me down. I'm glad he hasn't got a pass into the Restricted Section."

Lady Madeleine meowed her agreement, and they headed for the library.

"...ans...Evans...Harry."

Harry woke with a start, upsetting Lady Madeleine, who had been sleeping on his head. "Sorry, Maddie," he mumbled. He checked his watch and groaned at the time.

Someone cleared their throat. "Evans. The library is closed, and has been for some time."

Harry grimaced, then turned to look at Percy. "Sorry. I don't know how I fell asleep. I was in the middle of..." he trailed off as he saw his reams of arithmancy sprawled across the table for anyone to see. No one else studied in the Restricted Section. It was too hostile, too uncanny, too often frightening. Some books were cursed, some changed places without warning, some didn't want to be read, some tempted you to read them. The shelves rearranged themselves. It was a wonderful, confusing maze.

He looked back at Percy, who was watching him intently.

"I know what you're doing," Percy said.

Harry leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. If there was anyone he didn't want to know, it was Percy. Austere, law-abiding, Ministry-destined, cunning, brilliant Percy.

"Do you?" Harry tried, hoping Percy would let this go. "I'm only studying theory."

"You see," Percy began, sitting down across from him. Across from the damning evidence. "I've been trying to work out what exactly it is you're researching."

Harry sighed. "Do you know where spells come from?"

Percy watched him carefully. "You want to invent spells. You're talking about experimental magic."

"Yes," Harry said, still looking at the ceiling. There was no point in lying.

"That is highly regulated," Percy said. "You need a permit from the Ministry."

“Then I’ll get a permit when the time comes,” Harry said, rubbing his face. Lady Madeleine jumped onto the table again, scattering his hours of work.

“They are prohibitively expensive,” Percy said.

Harry glanced at Percy. “Then I’ll not get a permit.”

Percy pinched the bridge of his nose. “Evans, one of my neighbors died developing a spell. She left behind a husband and a daughter. They waive the fine and Azkaban sentence in cases of death, otherwise it would financially ruin the survivors.”

Harry knew he was talking about Luna's mum.

“What should I do then?” Harry asked. “This is what I want to do with my life. I don’t want to simply *do* magic, I want to create it.”

“There are exceptions,” Percy said, “as there are with every rule.”

“Such as?”

Percy leaned closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. “The Department of Mysteries.”

Harry was momentarily dazzled by the constellation of freckles on Percy’s face. Percy’s hazel eyes were so dilated they were almost completely black. “Huh?”

“The Department of Mysteries!” Percy hissed. “They are *highly* selective about who they hire, and what they do is obviously a mystery, but if you want to avoid paying for a permit and to experiment *legally*, that’s where you need to go.”

“Right, I knew that.” Harry said, blushing. He’d already put his foot in it. Now Percy was going to think he was an idiot. “In case you’ve missed it, I’m still in Hogwarts. Those laws don’t apply to underage wizards.”

“They are *ex post facto*,” Percy said. “The Ministry isn’t lenient with people like you.”

“Like what?” Harry asked. “Poor? Muggleborn? Gay?”

“Yes,” Percy said bluntly. “To all of the above. The average age in the Wizengamot is ninety-three.”

Harry watched as Percy removed a sheaf of paper from his robes. “This is the application for an internship with the Ministry. It is due by New Year. They’ll want to see all of your grades, and acceptance is contingent on your O.W.L.s. It’s a way to get your foot in the door.”

Harry accepted the papers. He had never considered working for the Ministry. He didn’t like the Ministry, and felt he had very little power to do anything about that, short of going rogue. Plenty of magical people flew under the Ministry’s radar. Knockturn Alley was filled with them.

“Thank you,” he said.

Percy nodded, then looked at his arithmancy work. "At least you are taking precautions."

Lady Madeleine knocked an open ink well off the table. Harry winced as it hit the floor.

"I'll clean up here," Harry said, pushing himself up.

"I'll assist," Percy said, gathering Harry's books and floating them away. Harry sadly watched them go, then began stacking his papers. He spelled Lady Madeleine clean, as well as the floor, and packed his bag.

"Are you ready?"

Harry looked up and saw Percy waiting for him.

"I am," Harry said, picking his kitten up.

They left the library together. It wasn't that long a walk from the library to the entrance hall, but the silence seemed to stretch between them.

"What were you doing in the library so late?" Harry asked.

"I was patrolling the first floor," Percy said.

"Oh."

They lapsed back into silence.

When they reached the entrance hall, Harry turned to Percy. "Percy, I—"

"Have a good night, Evans," Percy said without looking at him. He began walking up the grand staircase.

"Good night," Harry said quietly, watching Percy disappear.

Lady Madeleine started purring.

"Thanks," Harry said, walking into the dungeons. "I needed that."

Chapter End Notes

Welsh part, probably

"Do you have any more questions?"

"No."

Off the Map

Chapter Summary

December 1993

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Monty stared at the map he had just been given, watching Fred and George walk down a corridor. He didn't need the map to get into Hogsmeade, they just could have told him where the secret passage was, but they had given it to him anyway.

He was tempted to run off right away, but stopped himself. It was snowing, and he wasn't dressed for the weather. Moreover, he didn't have his invisibility cloak.

"You have a cloak. Use it."

Decided, Monty tapped the map and whispered, *"Mischief managed,"* watching as it went immediately blank. He folded it up and slipped it into his pocket, then walked as casually as he could back to his dormitory.

He was accosted as soon as he stepped through the portrait hole.

"Monty! Monty!"

Monty plastered a smile on his face as Colin Creevey shouted at him. Ginny blushed, and gave him a hesitant smile.

"Hi, Monty!"

"Hi, Colin," Monty said. He had forgotten all the first- and second-years were staying behind. "Just forgot my cloak."

He hurried out of the common room before he could get dragged into a conversation. He was glad Colin and Ginny were doing well, but between the blushing and the hero worship, Monty couldn't tolerate spending much time with either. He was Monty Potter, the Boy Who Lived, to them. Not Monty.

In his dormitory, Monty got his bag and stuffed the things he needed inside. Invisibility cloak, scarf, gloves, winter cloak. Walking around in a winter outfit would be too suspicious. He quickly left Gryffindor Tower, waving a hasty goodbye to everyone in the common room. He made his way to the third-floor corridor, taking even breaths to calm his heart and mind.

Harry had shown him a big secret of Hogwarts. He couldn't wait to show Harry the Marauder's Map.

He took it out again in a shadowed alcove. "*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.*"

His eyes roamed the map. The coast was clear. Except for one dot, hopping down the stairs to the third-floor.

Luna Lovegood.

Monty bit his lip. Luna was a second-year, and definitely wasn't allowed in Hogsmeade. But he also never really got to spend time with her without Ron and Hermione around, and they didn't share any classes or even the same house. He had been looking forward to spending the holidays with her and Harry, like the year before. Luna's dad had gone on another winter expedition, to Mongolia to search for the elusive Mongolian death worm. They were less dangerous in hibernation, according to Luna.

Monty had been a little resentful about Ron and Hermione deciding to stay for the holidays. He had assumed, and rightfully so, that almost everyone would be signing up to go home given Sirius Black was still at large. Hermione had said she wanted to study, but she always wanted to study and could do that at home just as well as at Hogwarts. Ron said he couldn't stand to spend two weeks with Percy. What about the rest of his family? He knew they were staying for him, but he had other people.

Monty watched Luna's dot get closer and closer, then put the map away and stepped out to greet her.

"Good morning, Monty," she said cheerfully. She was wearing a festive robe that looked like a pinecone. It also smelled like a pinecone. Were those pinecones in her hair?

Monty glanced at her feet to make sure she had shoes on, half expecting more pinecones.

"Good morning, Luna," he said. "I was going to sneak into Hogsmeade. Want to come with?"

Harry had begged off going to the Three Broomsticks with his friends, claiming he wanted to do some more shopping. They knew, and he knew, he simply didn't want to be there when Cedric was. Nor Percy and Penelope. He *did* need to do some more shopping. He could plunder the Room of Lost Things for gifts, but it decidedly lacked perishable items. Specifically, anything from Honeydukes.

Derek Wilkes had confided to him that his parents—his squib mother and muggle father—didn't want him home for Christmas. They had even made him change his name from his father's to his mother's maiden name, a pureblood name. He doubted Derek's parents would be sending him any presents. He had spoken to his dad about getting Derek proper winter

attire, but clothes didn't exactly make exciting gifts. Magical sweets, however, were certain to blow Derek's mind. Every kid raised in the muggle world had that in common.

He wasn't sure what Derek would like, and was wondering if he should say *fuck it* and get both Pepper Imps and Ice Mice, when there was the sensation of cold water trickling down his back.

Harry didn't react. He didn't understand why he could feel Monty's invisibility cloak nearby. An allergy to demiguises? Whatever the cause, Harry found it convenient. It came in handy when, for example, one's little brother broke out of the castle and snuck into Hogsmeade.

Something invisible bumped against him.

"What are you doing here?" he whispered. "It's much too crowded."

"I told you he always knows," he heard Monty whisper.

"Did you bring someone with you?" Harry asked, exasperated.

"Hello, Harry," he heard Luna whisper.

Harry closed his eyes, then grabbed packs of Pepper Imps and Ice Mice. "I'm going to buy these, and you two are going to go back to the castle."

"But we just got here!" Monty said, a little too loudly. "It took ages!"

Harry sighed. "Stay close to me. Honestly, do people forget I'm a prefect?"

Shaking his head, Harry waded through the crowd to purchase the various sweets he had collected. He closed his eyes as he heard a display get knocked over. Someone yelped when their foot got stepped on. Harry took his change, thanked the frazzled employee, then left Honeydukes.

Outside, the snow was heavy, swirling in the wind.

"I hope you two are dressed for the weather," he muttered, putting the hood of his cloak up. "This way."

He walked around the side of Honeydukes. It was almost impossible to see anything with all the snow, so he wasn't too worried about his brother being caught.

As soon as they were off the high street, Monty took off his cloak. Harry laughed. Monty and Luna were in identical outfits.

Monty blushed when he realized what Harry was laughing about. "I did that copying charm you showed me."

"Good idea," Harry said, taking out his wand. "Since I'm now part of this conspiracy, I think a few more changes are in order. Bumping around Hogsmeade invisible isn't going to end well, for any of us."

“What are you going to do?” Luna asked, blinking up at him.

Harry smiled at her. “What colors do you like?”

When Harry was finished, Monty and Luna were unrecognizable, if you didn’t look too closely. Monty had opted for red hair. It made Harry’s heart ache, but he couldn’t say no. Luna wanted green hair, and a yellow cloak. She looked like an upside down dandelion.

“I have a few more shops to visit,” Harry said. “I want you two to stay close. Not only are neither of you allowed to be here, but Sirius Black is still around, and the Ministry has dementors patrolling after dark. Who knows where they are during the day.”

Monty and Luna nodded at him.

Harry hesitated, then asked, “Did you want to meet with your friends? I saw Weasley and Granger in the Three Broomsticks.”

Monty shook his head. “I’m with them all the time. I’d rather look around with you and Luna.”

Harry smiled, then struck out to brave the snowy streets once more.

Monty couldn’t believe his luck. Of all the people to have run into at Honeydukes, it was the one person he was pretty sure wouldn’t turn him in. Harry had taken them to look at the headquarters of the Wizarding Wireless Network, which Monty hadn’t noticed his first time in Hogsmeade. Then to a music shop, which Monty had also missed. Harry needed more rosin and cotton for his hurdy-gurdy. They stopped by Tomes and Scrolls, where Harry spent a long time looking at an expensive law book which had just come out.

“*Legal Guidelines for the Manufacture of Magical Apparatus - Muggle Protection Act of 1993 Addendum*,” Monty read. “What is that?”

“For anyone who wants to legally make and sell magical items,” Harry said. It was an eye-popping five hundred galleons. “Your friend Ron’s dad is behind it. The update, I mean.”

“Daddy says it’s government overreach,” Luna chipped in.

Harry looked pensive at this. “I think your dad might not want that opinion to get around, unless he’s already published it in *The Quibbler*.” He turned the book over. “Published by the Ministry, of course. That’s one way to regulate, make it too expensive for the commoners.”

Someone brushed past Monty, and he turned to see who it was. They must have gone down another aisle, since he couldn’t see anyone. Dismissing it, Monty followed Harry and Luna as they explored the rest of the shop’s selection.

“Are you two hungry?” Harry asked as they searched the shelves.

Luna nodded, and Monty asked, “Are we going to the Three Broomsticks?”

“No,” Harry said. “Unless you really want to.”

“I was wondering, since everyone is there,” Monty said, relieved.

“It would not be the best idea,” Harry said.

“Why weren’t you with your friends?” Luna asked.

“I *am* with my friends,” Harry said, smiling at her.

“Your *Slytherin* friends,” Monty said, giving Harry a flat look. “And what about your, um, boyfriend?”

Harry’s smile faded. “Does it bother you? That I fancy blokes?”

Monty shook his head emphatically. “I don’t care about things like that.”

“Love is the most powerful magic,” Luna said firmly. “All kinds.”

Harry covered his face, but Monty could tell he was blushing. “I’m glad to hear that. I don’t actually have a boyfriend right now. I broke up with him over a month ago.”

“Really?” Monty said. “Why?”

“That’s hard to explain,” Harry said, turning to look at some books. “I reckon the bottom line is I just don’t feel that way about him.”

Monty nodded. “So where are we going to eat?”

Harry hid his smirk at Monty and Luna’s reactions to the Hog’s Head. Luna seemed oblivious to the surroundings. Harry knew she had traveled all over the world with her dad, and had been exposed to all sorts of cultures and lifestyles. Monty, on the other hand, had lived his entire life in a cookie-cutter middle class suburb. It was possible the first pub he’d ever been in was the Leaky Cauldron, which was a far sight better off than the Hog’s Head.

Harry led Monty and Luna to a table, scanning the room. Unlike last time, Fred and George weren’t there in disguise. They had got their Hogsmeade privilege back, given they hadn’t tried to blow up any small animals of late. There was one person who looked like a pile of rags slumped in a corner, but it sounded like they were asleep.

“Could I have two butterbeers and a pint of lager?” Harry asked hopefully.

The old man, who looked oddly familiar to Harry, gave him a blank stare and put three butterbeers on the bar. "Six sickles."

"Do you have anything to eat?" Harry asked, glancing at Monty and Luna.

The old man grunted. "Not much. Bridie. Goat cheese. I've got a round of shortie as well"

Harry was bemused by the eclectic choices. "I think the bridie and shortbread."

The old man grunted again. "A galleon for the lot."

Harry set the coin on the bar, and waited while the man went to collect the food from wherever it was. The man returned quickly with three steaming pasties and a round of shortbread cut into slices.

"By the way," Harry asked as he gathered the drinks and food, "what's your name?"

The old man narrowed his bright blue eyes. "Aberforth."

Harry nodded, then went to join Monty and Luna. Aberforth. Where had he heard the name before...

As an Occlumens, Harry had perfect control over his emotions at all times.

Almost.

He missed a step and nearly fell, the food and bottles he carried slipping precariously on the tray. He made it to the table and sat down hard, looking up at Aberforth *Dumbledore* as he disappeared into the back.

"Bloody hell," Harry breathed, turning to Monty and Luna, who had guilty looks. "What are you two up to? I've only been gone a minute."

"We were just talking about how we would get back into the castle," Monty said.

"Through the front door, obviously," Harry said, taking out his wand to cast a silencing charm. "You've got your cloak."

"But it doesn't work on dementors," Monty said, frowning.

"They can't see, so they don't know whether you're invisible or not," Harry said. "They can sense emotions, though I don't know whether they can tell people apart. If we go back as part of a large group, it should be fine. I am curious," he added, looking between Monty and Luna, "how you two managed to get out."

Harry listened to Monty and Luna's journey through the tunnel that led to the Honeydukes' cellar. It was clear Monty was leaving something out, such as how he even learned the tunnel existed, but Harry decided to ask him about it later. He could make an educated guess at where the information had come from.

When the tale was over, the food reduced to crumbs, Harry checked his watch. “You two ought to start heading back, before people start returning from Hogsmeade.”

It was still snowing heavily outside, so they bundled up and entered the storm. Around the corner from Honeydukes, Harry pulled Monty to the side.

“Meet me tonight,” he whispered.

Monty nodded, then he and Luna disappeared under his invisibility cloak. Harry smiled when he saw they didn’t leave any prints in the snow. His brother was getting better at sneaking around.

He had agreed to walk back to Hogwarts with his friends, so Harry kept the smile on his face and headed for the Three Broomsticks.

Harry jumped when someone tapped him on the shoulder. He had been waiting for his brother next to the tapestry of dancing trolls, and had expected to sense him coming in his invisibility cloak. To his surprise, when he turned around he saw Monty, completely visible.

“You haven’t got your cloak?” he asked.

Monty smiled. “I don’t need it anymore.”

“Did you learn how to disillusion yourself?” Harry asked.

Monty shook his head, then grabbed his arm. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

Instead of the Room of Requirement, Monty led him into an empty classroom. Harry watched as Monty took out an old, yellowed piece of parchment.

“Watch this,” Monty said, taking out his wand. He touched the parchment then said, “*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.*”

Curly words in emerald green began writing themselves on the parchment.

Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs

Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers

are proud to present

THE MARAUDER’S MAP

It was a map of Hogwarts. A map of Hogwarts that appeared to track every person, ghost, and animal in the school. He could see Mrs. Norris prowling the fourth floor, and Lady Madeleine sneaking up behind her. Amusingly, Lady Madeleine's full name was Madeleine, Princess of Mercia.

"Where did you get this?" he asked, looking up at Monty.

"Fred and George," Monty said with a grin. "They nicked it from Filch's office when they were in first year."

Harry raised an eyebrow. It certainly explained a lot. The twins were notoriously hard to catch in the act. He returned to examining the map.

It was a remarkable piece of magic. Harry had a vague idea how something like it could be created; part of the Defense curriculum that year was in detection, revealing, and tracking charms. The map was a visual representation of those charms. The creators had either got their hands on a blueprint of the school, which Harry doubted existed, or mapped it out themselves. Jasmine had done much the same thing, though she was one person and hadn't been nearly so extensive.

It could also be a means of finding Sirius Black, if he had remained in the area.

Harry found where he and Monty were, then looked to where the Room of Requirement was. It wasn't on the map. Curious at this oversight, he spread the map out and searched for the kitchens. That room was also missing. All the common rooms were on the map, though, so either the creators hadn't found the kitchens and the Room of Requirement, or they couldn't put them on the map.

"Make sure to keep this safe," Harry said. "This is amazing magic, but it's also very dangerous. And questionable."

"What do you mean?" Monty asked.

"What if Sirius Black had something like this?" Harry asked. "Or someone else who was after one of the students? And think about it, how would you feel if someone was watching where you were at all times?"

Monty grimaced. "When you put it like that, yeah."

"It is hard to read," Harry admitted, looking at the Marauder's Map again. It was late, so most of the dots were clustered in the dormitories, illegible. He could only imagine how confusing it would be during school hours. What about all the owls? The house-elves? The centaurs and merfolk? It would have made the map entirely useless if every single thing was tracked. It'd be a mess, but it also told Harry that the four creators—Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs, unusual aliases—had some significant blindspots, and perhaps hadn't considered certain creatures worth tracking.

The Marauder's Map had been confiscated by Filch at some point, and it was the sort of thing only useful to someone in Hogwarts. So the creators were likely students. Based on the exclusion of magical creatures, possibly pureblood students. The names stood out to him, but Harry didn't necessarily have to work out what they meant. He had an easier way of uncovering their identities.

"Thank you for showing this to me," Harry said, smiling at his brother. "This is really cool."

"I thought so too," Monty said excitedly.

Harry knew it was something he ought to turn in to his dad, or even Dumbledore. But Monty knew he was a prefect. He was trusting Harry not to sell him out. "Don't let anyone know about this. Almost anyone else would tell you to turn it in to a professor, but I think it's better in your hands."

"Why's that?" Monty asked

"To keep yourself safe," Harry said. "If you see someone coming for you, this will make it easier to hide."

Seeing such a map, something probably made by a group of friends while they were in school, made Harry question the competence of the headmaster. Surely a great wizard such as Dumbledore could have created something similar? Mapmaking wasn't exactly a novel idea.

Monty yawned, then looked embarrassed by it.

"You should probably go to bed," Harry suggested. "You did crawl around a tunnel for hours."

After Monty bid him goodnight, taking his map with him, Harry sat in the darkened classroom for some time. With his brother out of the room, he could allow himself to feel his growing fury.

Manfred and Georgius Weasley, Tweedledipshit and Tweedledumbfuck, had known, for months, there were secret passages into Hogwarts which Filch was unaware of. Passages someone like Sirius Black could discover, could use to find Monty and kill him. They hadn't said a thing. Even if they didn't want to tell anyone, they could have at least barricaded them until Sirius Black was captured.

The desk Harry was sitting at caught on fire. He sat back and watched it burn.

Percy braced himself as he entered the infirmary. The train was leaving in a few hours, and Madam Pomfrey would be giving him a few extra doses of litorin to take home. She did what she could. He knew Harry was in the infirmary some mornings, and tried to arrive at a different time from him.

Percy was not so lucky that morning.

Harry was sitting on a bed, drinking a bright red potion Percy didn't recognize. He was wearing that black jumper again. He froze with the goblet pressed to his lips, meeting Percy's eyes. Harry raised an eyebrow, then took a sip.

"Good, Mr. Weasley, right on time," Madam Pomfrey said, hurrying out of her office. "Don't mind Mr. Evans, we'll just shut these..."

Percy let himself be guided to a bed, the curtains twitching shut around him. He tugged off his robes, then lifted his shirt so Madam Pomfrey could administer his injection. He was used to sensation, and the relief was immediate. The pain, like lightning running through his veins, was gone. He could think more clearly, breathe more easily. He could feel his legs. The first time he had taken litorin, he hadn't known how much pain he lived with every day. It was normal to him. He thought it was like that for everyone. It had been worse in recent weeks, but nothing he couldn't live with.

Percy always felt his best in the morning. It never failed to annoy his siblings, him being a morning person.

"You need to test yourself every morning," Madam Pomfrey said firmly, passing him two weeks worth of litorin. A small fortune to him. "Use the luminosity test, particularly if you aren't feeling your best. It's failproof, if imprecise."

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey," Percy said, pulling his robes back on. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Mr. Weasley," she said. "Leave whenever you feel ready."

Madam Pomfrey walked through the curtains.

"Are you finished, Mr. Evans?" Percy heard her say.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry replied.

"Well, best not hang about," she said. "I'm sure your friends are missing you."

"You still haven't forgiven them?" Harry asked, sounding amused.

"For attempting to break into my infirmary?" Madam Pomfrey said. "Charming all the bedding? Or the *literature* Mr. Pucey deemed fit to leave lying about?"

"I apologize on their behalf," Harry said gravely.

Madam Pomfrey tutted. "Run along, Mr. Evans. Give Andromeda my regards."

"I will," Harry said.

Percy blushed. He had been standing around, eavesdropping on Harry, when he had things to do. He quickly walked through the curtains and nearly crashed into him. Harry had to grab onto his arm to not fall over.

“My apologies,” he said.

“It’s alright,” Harry said, letting his arm go. “You’re going home for Christmas?”

“I am,” Percy said. He found himself leaving the hospital wing at Harry’s side. “Penelope and I will be going to the ballet with her parents. I believe it’s called *The Nutcracker*.”

“That’s a popular one,” Harry said. “Tchaikovsky. I have a record of it. I used to listen to it around this time of year.” He looked up at Percy, his eyes sparkling. “I think you’ll love it.”

Percy swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. “I’m sure it will be enjoyable.”

Just then, Peeves dropped out of the ceiling, cackling madly when he spotted them.

“Two prefects!” Peeves squealed. “Perfect!”

Percy opened his mouth to tell him off, but Harry grabbed his arm again, squeezing in warning.

“How are you, Peeves?” Harry asked. “Getting into the holiday spirit?”

Peeves nodded, grinning widely. He had something behind his back, which had Percy immediately on guard. It could be anything.

His stomach sank when Peeves whipped out a sprig of mistletoe

“If the perfect prefects want protection from Peeves,” the horrible poltergeist sang, “They—”

“We get it, Peeves,” Harry said, sounding resigned. “Save your doggerel for the next two unfortunates you find. Wouldn’t want it to get old, would we?”

Peeves flipped upside down and blew a raspberry at them.

Percy stood rigidly as Harry turned to him. “I’m sorry, I’m sure this is uncomfortable for you. I know you’re not...” Harry closed his eyes, took a breath. “I’ll make it quick. And hopefully painless.”

Percy could only watch as Harry opened his eyes again and smiled coyly, then reached for his hand. He couldn’t even think through how loudly his heart was pounding, how warm and firm Harry’s grip was. Harry lifted Percy’s hand, looked at him as if expecting to be slapped away, then kissed his hand gently.

Blood rushed to Percy’s face. He felt like he was on fire. Harry had just...

“If you want any more than that, Peeves, you’ll have to pay for it,” Harry said, dropping Percy’s hand. Harry glanced at him, his smile becoming brittle.

“Happy Christmas, Percy,” he said. And then he walked away.

Percy clutched his hand to his chest, barely heard Peeves' maniacal laughter. He could still feel how soft Harry's lips had been on his skin. It was just his hand. It didn't mean anything. It was something his Aunt Muriel might do.

Aunt Muriel. *The Nutcracker*. Penelope.

Percy was abruptly aware of his surroundings. The train was leaving soon. He had to hurry. He couldn't afford...he couldn't get distracted.

It didn't mean anything. It was just another one of Peeves' stupid pranks.

He walked back to his dormitory, his thoughts frantic yet muddled, not noticing when people greeted him, not caring. His hand still burned.

Once inside his dormitory bathroom, he sealed the door behind him and removed the plethora of concealment charms from one of the stalls. Brewing potions in a bathroom with stolen ingredients, that's what he had been reduced to. But it was finally ready. His Amortentia.

The scent struck him like a punch to the gut.

Old books. A potions lab. Lavender and mint. Something soft and warm and undefinable and absolutely—

Percy stumbled back against a wall, sinking to the floor. Tears, unbidden, began to well. He pushed his glasses roughly up, a broken sob escaping him. A bubble-head charm. That's what he needed. He needed to stop breathing.

Percy fumbled in his robes, struggling to think. He needed his wand. His glasses fell off and skittered across the floor

He just had to bottle it. Just bottle it, and put it in his trunk, and go home, and everything would be fine.

He grabbed his wrist, the hand that wouldn't stop burning. A feeling he would never forget. He wanted to cut it off. He wanted...

He conjured a bubble around his head and fell forward on his hands and knees. The tears kept streaming down his face.

He just needed to bottle the potion.

Everything would be fine.

Chapter End Notes

UnfriendlyMollusk created a piece of adorable [fanart](#) for this chapter!

Peanut Brittle

Chapter Summary

December 1993

Harry stared out of the window, touching his lips again. The look on Percy's face was burned into his memory. The way the morning sun had struck his hazel eyes, sage green shot through with starbursts of warm brown. The tips of his ears turning red, the flush running down his neck. His lips slightly parted in surprise, in horror. The peculiar, sweet smell of litorin which seemed to linger even hours later. Harry knew Percy had hated it, but he couldn't stop thinking about it. He couldn't stop the shame and guilt for wanting more.

"You turned in that paper for McGonagall?"

"You were supposed to turn it in!"

"No, I was doing Flitwick's."

"I did Flitwick's. *You* were supposed to do Sprout's!"

"I thought you said McGonagall?"

"That was you!"

Harry dropped his hand in his lap. He'd apologize to Percy again later, then throttle Peeves for putting them both in that position. He was glad the holidays started that day. He needed the two weeks to clear his head.

Sighing, Harry leaned back on the bench and waited.

The door to the carriage opened. Fred and George piled in. They sat down across from Harry, jostling each other and bickering about who was supposed to do which assignment. After a few minutes, the carriage began to move.

Harry sat silently, invisibly, watching.

Halfway to Hogsmeade Station, he dropped the disillusionment.

Fred and George screamed.

"Hello," Harry said, smiling at them.

"Evans, what are you doing here?" George stuttered.

“Aren’t you staying at school for the holidays?” Fred asked.

“You needn’t worry your pretty little empty heads about that,” Harry said. “I thought we’d have a chat.”

“About what?” George asked suspiciously.

“I’m so glad you asked, Georgius,” Harry said. “You see, I saw something *very* interesting in Hogsmeade yesterday. Can you guess what that was?” He tapped his wand, and flames flickered at the end. “I would suggest you don’t make any of your puerile jokes.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” George said, narrowing his eyes.

“Manfred, care to take a shot?” Harry said, looking at Fred.

“No idea,” Fred said tightly.

Harry sighed. “I know you have a way to get into Hogsmeade. I know that you gave this information to a certain student who is not allowed to go to Hogsmeade for his own safety. For some reason too moronic for me to fathom, you two have decided to withhold this information from the professors, even *after* Sirius Black broke into the castle. Does any of this ring a bell?”

Fred and George looked at each other. “We didn’t think—”

“That is readily apparent,” Harry said icily. “Let me tell you two how things are going to be. You will tell the professors what you know about any and all secret passages out of the castle. You will explain to them why you failed to do so sooner, even though someone’s life is at stake. Not to mention the danger to your younger brother and anyone else who gets in Black’s way. You will do so without implicating anyone or *anything* else.”

“Okay,” Fred said, swallowing nervously. “You’re right, we should have told someone.”

“You cared more about not getting in trouble than Potter’s life,” Harry said, glaring at them.

“It’s not like that,” George protested.

“Then you can explain what it *is* like to Professor McGonagall and the headmaster,” Harry said as the carriage came to a stop. “‘Conscience does make cowards of us all,’ though I suppose in the case of you two it’s a *lack* of one.”

Harry flicked his wand at the door and it swung open. “Have a nice holiday.”

Fred and George scrambled out of the carriage without a backwards glance. The door slammed shut behind them.

Harry let out a breath, and leaned back on the bench again. Soon the thestrals would turn around and make the walk back to Hogwarts. The Whomping Willow tunnel was supposedly not a viable passage, given there was a Whomping Willow on top of it. The fourth floor one had caved in, he’d have to check if that was still the case. Then the one behind the witch with

a hump. Students were easily able to get in and out of Honeydukes using it, none the wiser. He could do something to the witch statute, caving it in completely when it could be useful to Monty in the future...

Harry closed his eyes as the thestrals began walking again. Hopefully Fred and George would actually tell someone. He didn't want Monty to get in trouble, or to lose that map he had got from the twins. The twins couldn't possibly be the only ones who knew about those passages. After all, they'd learned it from a map. The question remained, who had created it?

Harry idly touched his lips again.

"Do you want to play chess?" Ron asked hopefully.

"Not really," Monty said.

"What about gobstones? Percy left a set behind."

Monty sighed. If he wanted to play gobstones, he'd play with Luna or Harry. Harry was actually a little frightening when he played gobstones. He looked like he was waging war. Luna was more fun to play against.

"I'm going for a walk," Monty said, standing up. He was sick of sitting around in the common room. He could be exploring the castle with Luna, or discovering things in the Room of Lost Things with Harry. Would Harry mind if he told Luna about it? Monty didn't think he would, but Luna *was* a sleepwalker and might accidentally get herself trapped in there. Harry had cautioned him to be careful using the room, since they had no idea how it worked. Monty thought he was overprotective, which was annoying but also nice. Harry wasn't condescending about it, like McGonagall and her attempted quidditch practice ban. He was practical. The better Monty got at magic, the safer it would be.

"We haven't been to Hagrid's for a while," Ron said. "How about we visit him?"

"Monty's not supposed to leave the castle," Hermione said, not looking up from her book. What was the point in staying at school for the holidays if she was only going to read all the time?

"No one's told *me* that," Monty said. "I'm going to Hagrid's."

"Yeah, lighten up, Hermione," Ron said, following Monty to their dormitory.

Once they got their cloaks, Monty and his two friends walked down to the entrance hall. He paused to charm his boots so they wouldn't get wet and would stay warm. Harry had explained to him that for people who were muggle-raised, when a problem arose their first thought wasn't to think of a magical solution. It was something they had to train themselves to do, using magic in their daily lives. It wasn't just turning canaries into cups and shooting

fireballs. It was cooking, cleaning, sorting your things, vanishing rubbish. If there was a muggle way to do something, there was a magical way.

“What are you doing?” Hermione asked.

“Making sure my feet don’t freeze off,” Monty said.

“Oh, that’s a good idea! Why didn’t I think of that?”

Monty shrugged, then started for the doors. It had been snowing heavily the past week, and the grounds were blanketed. To his surprise, someone had already been making paths in the snow. Then he heard familiar laughter. He looked around and saw Luna and Harry, along with a first-year boy whose name he didn’t recall, making snow people. He felt an angry throb of jealousy when he saw Harry explaining to the first-year boy how to do some spell or another.

“What are they doing?” Ron asked.

Harry looked up and spotted them. He smiled and waved a gloved hand. Monty hesitated, then waved back.

“Hello, Monty!” Luna called out.

“Hello, Luna,” he called back, smiling.

“Where are you three headed?” Harry asked.

“We’re allowed to be on the grounds,” Ron said mulishly.

The first-year ducked behind his snow person, peeking out at them.

“That wasn’t what I was asking,” Harry said, sounding confused. “I was only curious.”

“Ron,” Hermione hissed. “He’s a prefect!”

“So?” Ron said. “He should mind his own business.”

“We’re going to visit Hagrid,” Monty said.

Harry smiled at him. “We were going to have a snowball fight later. This is actually the prelude to it. Do you lot want to join? It could be three against three.”

“I’ve never had a magical snowball fight before,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “It would be an interesting insight into magical culture.”

“I bet Professor Burbage will give you extra credit if you write an essay on it,” Monty teased.

“You think?” Hermione asked.

“Come on,” Ron said, breaking a new path to Hagrid’s hut. “It’s freezing.”

“Sounds good,” Monty said to Harry. Luna beamed at him, then stabbed a turnip into her snow person’s face. He knew from experience she had a vicious streak. He was concerned about what would happen if she applied it to gobstones. She might give Harry a run for his money.

Monty waved goodbye, then followed Ron and Hermione to Hagrid’s.

Luna had somehow talked the Bloody Baron into letting her into the Slytherin common room, where Harry had discovered her and Derek playing gobstones. He had left them to it, and went to the library. His prefect duties were suspended during the holidays—he couldn’t patrol the entire castle by himself every night—and he was eager to take advantage of having no class and no assignments.

After visiting Hagrid, Monty and his friends had gone directly back to the castle. Harry was let down, as he had been planning a trench warfare campaign. But there was still plenty of time for that.

Harry didn’t know how often the library got in new books. He assumed Madam Pince was in charge of purchasing, though he suspected certain texts were omitted. Their course books, for example. Thus, he wasn’t surprised that the latest *Legal Guidelines for the Manufacture of Magical Apparatus* wasn’t on the shelves. Knowing more about the law gave him more tools to circumvent it without explicitly breaking it.

He had already filled out the internship application Percy had given him, but hadn’t yet sent it. It was a commitment to work all summer. To work for the *Ministry* all summer. But it would also be a good experience. If he didn’t like it, he didn’t have to do it again. The Department of Mysteries did sound interesting. Harry didn’t think he’d ever get to see if he didn’t work for the Ministry.

Maybe Percy’s dad had a copy of the guidelines?

Harry blushed, shame washing over him. He knew he shouldn’t have enjoyed kissing Percy’s hand. They had been pressured into it, lest Peeves retaliate. It wasn’t anything. It didn’t matter how elegant Percy’s fingers were, nor how adorable the smattering of freckles on the back of his hand was.

“Oh, excuse me.”

Harry looked up and saw Hermione struggling under a stack of heavy tomes.

“Use a levitation charm, Granger,” Harry said.

“There’s no magic allowed in the library,” Hermione said.

Harry rolled his eyes, which was less effective as Hermione couldn't see over her books. "That rule exists so students who are less sure in their magic don't damage any books. How do you think Madam Pince manages a collection this large? Magic."

Hermione huffed. "That's different. It's her job."

"And it's *my* job to assist struggling students," Harry said with a smile. "What are you researching?" He looked over the titles. They were all casebooks, trials involving magical creatures.

"Buckbeak, the hippogriff that Malfoy baited, has a hearing in front of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures," she said.

Harry frowned at the books. "You'll need to look at cases that went before the Committee. They aren't going to care about what happened in the ICW or—" he grabbed the top book "—the Aztec Empire?"

Hermione grumbled. "Why not?"

"Because the laws are different," Harry said. "And because they aren't British. Your friend Weasley, his father works in the Ministry, right?"

"He does," she said.

"Why don't you owl him? He might know where to get a copy of what the Committee's rules are. You could owl the Committee directly too."

Hermione staggered, then righted herself. "It *would* be helpful to know by what criteria they're judging Buckbeak."

Harry watched her walk out of the library, still struggling under her tower of books. He would have liked it if Monty and his friends had chosen to work in the library, but some people found the common rooms more comfortable.

He crossed his arms and walked back into the Restricted Section. If he had any desire to interact with Cedric, he would have suggested Hermione contact Amos Diggory, or someone else in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures familiar with all hippogriff-related laws. Luna knew quite a bit about magical creatures, but she was only twelve and wouldn't have a robust foundation in the legal side of things. In fact, her father seemed to completely disregard the law, and the creatures they were interested in were largely considered mythical.

Percy would...

Harry sat down in his chair, staring at the equations he was working on. If he was braver, he might have written Percy himself and asked for help with Buckbeak. Working in the library together, side by side, arguing about the Ministry's hippogriff jurisprudence...

Harry put his head in his hands. It wasn't going to happen. He didn't know what he and Percy were, but the more time passed, the more he suspected they were nothing at all.

Monty looked up as Hermione entered the common room, encumbered by a ridiculous number of books.

“What’s all that for?” Ron asked.

“Buckbeak, obviously,” Hermione panted, dropping the books on a table. “We can look through cases where other hippogriffs were put on trial after being baited. You know, I ran into Evans in the library.”

“You did?” Monty asked, sitting up.

Hermione nodded. “He said we should owl Mr. Weasley since he works for the Ministry and would know more about how the Committee works.”

“Yeah, we can do that,” Ron said with a shrug.

Hermione beamed at him, then began handing them books.

“Did he say anything else?” Monty asked.

“Well, he doesn’t think it’s a good idea to be using cases from other countries,” Hermione said. “He said they wouldn’t take it seriously because the laws are different.”

“What does he know?” Ron asked. “He’s probably on Malfoy’s side.”

Monty turned to him. “What’s your problem with him anyway?”

“He’s a prefect, for starters,” Ron said, “and he’s friends with Percy. Who’d want to be friends with *him*?”

“That’s rather harsh,” Hermione said. “He’s got a girlfriend, after all.”

Ron snorted. “Yeah, and he won’t shut up about her.” He opened the book Hermione had given him and began reading.

Monty turned to the book he held. It was thick and dusty, and he could barely make out the words. The cases inside were very old, and he wondered if they were even relevant. Wouldn’t the laws be different? What if some judge overruled it? Then the old decision wouldn’t even matter. He didn’t know a thing about the law, but neither did Hagrid and it seemed like Hagrid was going to be the person defending Buckbeak.

Sighing, Monty opened the book. This wasn’t how he had imagined his holidays at all.

Harry was still shaky after he left his appointment with Andromeda. His dad had come with him this time, which made Harry anxious as he didn't trust anyone else with his brother's safety. But Monty had his cloak, and his map, and the other professors.

Since they were in muggle London, which had so many sidewalks, Harry had brought his skateboard. He rolled despondently on it. He'd barely seen Monty since the start of the holidays, outside of meals. Hermione had strong-armed Monty into helping prepare for Buckbeak's hearing in four months.

"Would you like to do anything while we are here?" his dad asked, walking at his side.

"Do you think the headmaster would mind if I built a halfpipe on the grounds?" he asked.

His dad sighed. "You often purchase gifts for your friends."

Harry shrugged. He was slowing down, so he kicked again. "I doubt he'd want one from me this year."

"He?"

Harry bit his lip, then said, "Percy."

"Ah," his dad said. "The least insufferable Weasley."

Harry laughed quietly. "Yeah, he is. I was only going to spend a few quid, nothing big. Something from a supermarket."

"I see no harm in it," his dad said. "As I recall, there is a Sainsbury's several blocks from here."

Harry felt a flutter of excitement, which he attributed to spotting a viable ledge to grind on. "Is it okay if we go to a skatepark too?"

His dad lifted the book he carried. "Why do you think I brought this?"

Harry smiled and skated ahead.

Percy walked into the kitchen to find his mother pouring peanuts into a large vat.

"Percy, could you grab the vanilla?" she asked. "Thank you, dear."

He found the bottle on the counter and passed it to her. "For Christmas?"

She smiled at him. “Just so. I’ve got to send Ron and Monty’s package soon. I was going to send something to Harry as well.”

“He’s allergic to peanuts,” Percy said automatically.

His mother’s eyes widened. “Oh, goodness, I’m glad you told me! I’ll have to think of something else.”

“He is fond of toffee,” Percy said.

She smiled at him. “You must be getting to know the other prefects quite well now that you’re Head Boy!”

“Indeed,” Percy said. He couldn’t very well say he watched Harry in the Great Hall, or that the best part of sitting with Penelope at the Ravenclaw table was listening to Harry talk. “Is there anything else I may assist you with?”

His mother patted his arm. “Not at the moment, dear.”

Percy nodded, then turned to go back to his room. He couldn’t even remember why he had gone to the kitchen in the first place.

Harry checked his watch, then set Lady Madeleine on the floor.

“Go,” he whispered.

She sprinted down the corridor and around a corner, very fast for a kitten. He licked his retainer, looking around for any nosy ghosts or portraits, then crept towards Filch’s office. It was the witching hour, so muggles called it, when most people were deep asleep.

With a tap of his wand, the lock clicked open, and he slipped inside. By the light of his wand, Harry looked around. He had never been in the room before. It was small and cramped, windowless, and packed with overfull filing cabinets.

He thought back to the state the Marauder’s Map had been in. It looked old. He didn’t know enough about parchment to say *how* old, though. Seeing the quantity of reports Filch filed, reports he doubted any other being, living or dead, ever saw, he would have to make multiple trips. It would be simpler to ask the man himself, he had an almost eidetic memory for miscreants and their various offenses, but too suspicious. Unless Harry was willing to Obliviate Filch, which he wasn’t.

He knew Lady Madeleine wouldn’t be able to distract Mrs. Norris for long, so Harry sighed and opened the first drawer.

Papers exploded out, scattering all over Filch's office. Harry pulled a particularly sticky one off of his face.

It was going to be a long night.

A Cracked Nut

Chapter Summary

Christmas Eve 1993

Percy sat on his bed.

He could hear his mother in the kitchen below. The clatter of dishes, her slippered footsteps, humming along to a warbling Celestina Warbeck whose voice came through soulful and clear as she sang those familiar, trite tunes.

Ginny was listening to the Weird Sisters in her own room, the banal rock music pulsing through his floor. He didn't know which he detested more, Warbeck's sanitized and vapid ballads, or the Weird Sisters farcical amalgam of muggle garage rock. It was novel to the magical youth because they'd never heard that kind of music before. They had almost no muggle or muggleborn fans.

Harry didn't like the Weird Sisters. Percy had overheard a conversation Harry had with Urquhart about how overrated they were. He'd seen the lyrics Harry would idly scribble in the margins of his work, heard him singing softly to himself. Heard him singing to Luna Lovegood after waking her from a nightmare.

An explosion from next door rocked his room. Percy kept sitting on his bed as the shouting commenced. Fred and George were always moving, always making noise. They demanded attention, and they got it. That it annoyed Percy was incidental, amusing. Talking to them, yelling at them, trying to explain the concept of empathy to them, did nothing.

Percy picked up his wand and cast a few silencing charms. The noise stopped. The silence rang in his ears.

There wasn't much to say about his room, the culmination of seventeen years of life. A single bed, a red duvet. A worn desk. A chair with a wobbly leg that no sticking charms would fix. His old prefect badge, scarlet and gold, polished. His Head Boy badge, polished. He wore it as a reminder. Someone thought he was worthy of the position. It was physical proof that hard work yielded results. He couldn't wear it in the muggle world, though.

The suit hung from a hook on his door. It was one of his father's, what the Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office Arthur Septimus Weasley wore when entering the muggle world. Brown tweed. Coat, waist coat, trousers. A white cotton shirt with a starched collar. Burgundy tie. Gold cufflinks. Brown leather brogues, polished. His father had spoken with a muggle haberdasher to avoid the more common failings of wizards who attempted to blend

in. It was thoroughly muggle fashion. Percy's mother had let the hems out, as Percy was now taller than his father, and helped with the fit. Muggle clothes, held together by magic.

The tie was daunting. Percy doubted he would be able to put it on properly the muggle way, but he had a spell for it.

Harry would probably know how to tie a tie.

Percy closed his eyes. *That way lies madness.*

Professor Burbage was fond of Shakespeare.

Percy stood. He needed to put the suit on before he became incapable of thinking of anything other than Penelope Clearwater. They were going to a show, but his was the main performance.

He stepped through the narrow space between his bed and desk, walking past the bottle of swirling, pearlescent potion. A tea cup. The golden heart-shaped locket he had purchased from a muggle market in Alexandria over the summer. Inside, a thinned lock of Penelope's hair, discreetly collected. A pocket watch.

A gold fountain pen. A half-eaten Mars bar.

Percy slowly dressed himself. He quite enjoyed muggle fashions. He sometimes found it hard to take the headmaster seriously when his robes tended towards causing retinal damage with their vibrancy. Was there a worse color than puce? Harry had once compared it to a muggle antacid and antidiarrheal.

He looked around his room with dull eyes, putting the suit on piece by piece. It was a small, cramped space, but fastidiously clean. He had long outgrown the need or desire for trinkets and toys. His walls were lined with bookshelves, books arranged by subject and author. *The Once and Future King* was the only one out of place, sitting on his bed. Ordered, regimented. The corners of everything touched. It had got to the point where he considered hanging books from the ceiling. Harry would likely find it amusing.

Percy hung the tie around his neck and tapped it with his wand. It slithered around his neck, forming a loose knot then cinching. His wrists and ankles weren't exposed. The suit fit.

He sat down on his bed again, taking off his glasses to clean the lenses. There were salty stains that interfered with his vision. Putting them back on again, Percy looked at the potion he had brewed. The Amortentia.

Percy was not a fool. He knew what would happen when he took the Amortentia. Not all love potions were playful and benign. Amortentia was nothing compared to what he had been using, something one might laugh over with their friends, or what a young Molly Prewett would have given Arthur Weasley to pluck up the nerve to ask her to Hogsmeade. They still laughed about it. They told the story every anniversary.

He picked up his wand. "*Lumos.*"

The white light was cool and steady. Madam Pomfrey had expertly adjusted his dosage to accommodate the potion he had regularly been imbibing, ignorant of it though she was. He would have to guess at how much he needed to account for a full dose of Amortentia.

Percy set his wand down again, closing his eyes in thought.

Amortentia would strip him of all agency. There would be no Percy Weasley, only an infatuated body puppeteered by the potion's directive. The singular, all-consuming obsession with the target individual. He wouldn't think, or feel, or *be* anything else until the potion ran its course. It was a mania. Insanity. He would be unrecognizable.

Percy moved to his desk, sat on his wobbly chair. He picked up the locket and pressed the latch. It snicked open, two hearts connected by a single hinge. Penelope's hair was dry now. He removed it from the locket. It would need a new home now that the time for gift-giving had come. He looked at the calendar that hung above his desk, the only decoration in the room. Christmas Eve.

He set the locket back down, then picked up the bottle. Amortentia was among the most beautiful potions, despite its terrible power. It ensnared its victim with its alluring scent. The scent of what attracted one most. It made one want to drink it, to guzzle it, to drown in it.

Percy held his breath and uncorked the bottle. Steam rose from it in entrancing spirals. He poured a measure out into his empty tea cup, watching the potion swirl around the white ceramic. He recorked the bottle and pushed it to the side. He picked up a strand of Penelope's golden hair.

He took a breath.

Percy gritted his teeth against the smell.

He knew what he wanted.

He dropped Penelope's hair in, watched it float on the mother-of-pearl surface until it was consumed. The potion kept swirling, captivating him, tempting him, obscuring its duplicitous nature by promising what he wanted. It would give him something else, make him believe *that* was what he wanted. Rewarding him when this new object of obsession indulged him.

But underneath that beautiful, bewitching surface Percy knew, he *knew*, it had been defiled.

He took another breath, was assaulted anew.

"That's a popular one. Tchaikovsky."

Amortentia was the most powerful known love potion. Under its influence, he would find it impossible to discuss anything other than Penelope. He would be a gibbering idiot. What if Penelope's father asked him how he enjoyed the show? What if her mother wanted to discuss the proposed flying carpet embargo?

"I have a record of it. I used to listen to it around this time of year."

Great-Aunt Muriel would notice something. It would be impossible to hide. It didn't suit his needs for that evening.

"I think you'll love it."

Percy seized his wand and vanished the potion, cup and all. He still had some of the milder potion he brewed. It would make him more affectionate, more amenable, while allowing him to retain some agency.

The door to his room flew open, and Percy hastily knocked the bottle off of his desk. His mother stood in his doorway, her hands on her hips.

"Percy! I've been calling you for ages! What have I told you about silencing charms?"

"I apologize, mother," Percy said, turning to face her. He could feel sweat gathering on his back. It was too close a call. "I was just getting ready for this evening."

His mother's hands flew to her face and she cooed. "You look so handsome! Oh, you must be so excited for your big date!"

"I am," Percy said.

"You sure sound like it, Perce," George said, his face appearing over their mother's shoulder.

"What's it called again?" Fred asked from her other side. "*Cracking Nuts?*"

"*The Nutcracker*," Percy said. "A muggle toy soldier with a moving mouth. A shelled nut is placed in the mouth, and a lever is pressed to crack it open. Hence nutcracker. The ones muggles use to decorate their homes are not functional. They use metal nutcrackers now, or purchase the nuts without shells"

His mother and twin brothers gave him blank looks.

"Well, that is *very* interesting," his mother said indulgently.

"Percy's the life of the party," George said with a mocking grin.

"Just like Uncle Bi—ow!" Fred winced, then glared at George.

"Stop it, you two," their mother said, frowning at them both. She turned back to Percy and smiled. "Are you leaving so soon? Your father wanted to speak with you."

"I intend to arrive early," Percy said. He was meeting Penelope and her parents at the Leaky Cauldron, along with his Great-Aunt Muriel. She had been rather difficult to convince, but Percy knew having a relative on the Wizengamot was part of his appeal so he persisted. He could only hope she wouldn't want to make a scene in front of a theater filled with muggles, and that Penelope's parents found Aunt Muriel's temperament amusing rather than offensive.

His mother's smile grew. "You're very eager! I can't wait to meet Penelope, she sounds absolutely wonderful. It's a shame she can't come around for Christmas dinner. You know

she is more than welcome.”

“Christmas is a time for family,” Percy said.

His mother gave him a knowing look that made his stomach curdle, then her eyes started watering. He sat in numb horror as she hurried towards him. “And I thought Bill would be the first of you to—oh, now’s not the time for that! I don’t want to pressure you, dear. Let’s see...” She began petting his hair. “I don’t know *where* this mess of curls came from. You must have got it from my uncle Ignatius!” She tilted his head around, and all Percy could do was hope she didn’t see what he had just knocked onto the floor. He had to hide it somewhere. Maybe with the pigs. “Short on the sides, long on the top.” His mother pulled back. “You look so handsome!”

“Thank you,” Percy said.

“Oh, dear, you sound nervous,” his mother said, smoothing out the fabric on his shoulders. “I’ve spoken to Great-Aunt Muriel and told her to be on her *best* behavior!”

Percy tried to hide his alarm as his mother kissed him on the cheek. “Now, before you head off make sure you speak with your father!”

“I will do so,” Percy said, watching her leave his room. She left the door open. Percy leaned over and closed it, then checked the time.

The pocket watch his parents had given him was more complex than they had intimated. The floating clock face was projected when the watch was laid flat. He had several hours until he was due to arrive. He had a bottle brimming with a highly regulated, extremely dangerous potion. The thought of consuming it repulsed him, but soon Penelope would want more, would expect more, and he would need to...

Percy braced himself on his desk. He needed somewhere to hide the bottle. He couldn’t trust it would remain undiscovered if left in his room.

A pipe rattled. An idea formed.

Percy exited the attic and brushed his suit off, hoping he didn’t get any of the ghoul’s ectoplasm on him. Satisfied, he descended the stairs and entered the living room, where he found his father sitting on the couch. It was one of his rare days off, Christmas Eve, and his father had spent most of the day working on the Ford Anglia. He was currently holding a silver toaster, turning it about with a look of intense concentration.

“Good afternoon, father,” Percy said.

“Percy, there you are,” his father said, smiling warmly at him. “Sit down, I’ve got something for you.”

Percy moved to join his father on the couch. His father looked tired, the fine lines around his eyes deeper.

“Now, I know it’s a big night for you,” his father said. “I know a fine young lady like Penelope might have certain...expectations.”

Percy tensed.

His father chuckled. “I’m not talking about *that*. You’re old enough to work it out on your own. No, I’ve been saving some muggle money...”

His father reached into his robes, and pulled out several banknotes. “It says what each one is worth, it’s the coins that’ll trick you!”

Percy took the colorful money from his father. The image of a young Queen Elizabeth II, not a monarch they recognized. Twenty pounds, or twenty quid. He had once heard Harry refer to them as *squid*, which he found endlessly charming. The five pound notes were *fivers*, the ten pound notes *tenners*. Handling muggle money was part of the Muggle Studies curriculum.

“This is almost a hundred pounds,” Percy said. “Father, this is not necessary.”

His father smiled at him again. “Think of it as an early Christmas present. You two could go out to dinner, maybe one of those fast food places? How fast do you think they can make the food? Or buy her some muggle jewelry! Maybe you could even take the *Tube*, that’s their underground train system.”

Percy nodded, still staring at the money he had been given. “Thank you, father.”

His father laughed, then hugged his shoulders. “You know, your mother is quite taken with Penelope, and she hasn’t even met the girl!”

“I know,” Percy said. “I look forward to introducing them.”

“Well, I don’t want to keep you from your date,” his father said genially. “I know you’ve been excited about it. Ballet! You’ll have to tell me all about it when you get home. But don’t stay out too late, else your mother will worry.”

Percy said goodbye to his father, then went to the kitchen to be fussed over by his mother. Ginny, Fred, and George were all in their rooms. Ron had decided to remain at Hogwarts. Percy suspected Ron had also been getting letters from their mother, telling him to keep an eye on Monty.

He knew he didn’t have the best relationship with Ron. It was probably the worst out of all of their siblings. Fred and George took their older brothers being prefects in stride. They didn’t take it personally. Ron, and to some extent Ginny, did. He had to treat them like the other students. If he was too harsh it was because he was their brother, because he was acting like their mother, because they were making him look bad. If he was too lenient, it was favoritism.

Their mother always comparing her younger children to her older ones didn't help. *Be more like Bill* had been replaced with *Be more like Percy*. His grades, his being a prefect, his being Head Boy, his accomplishments were things his younger siblings ought to live up to. None of them were so inclined. Ron wanted it but didn't put the work in, and resented Percy because he did. At least, that was how Percy perceived it.

He knew muggles kept paper money in wallets, but Percy did not have one of those. The banknotes felt slick in his fingers.

His mother fluttered around him. He wasn't dressed for the weather. Gloves, scarf, overcoat were all pulled out of the maelstrom his mother had created in her excitement.

The banknotes were folded up and put into the pocket inside of his coat, next to his gift for Penelope. Next to a small potion vial. He left the kitchen and walked into the garden, reassuring himself that the money would not fall out. At the end of the garden, he apparated to the Leaky Cauldron.

Percy landed on a sidewalk darkened by a recent rain. He checked the time again. He still had several hours until the meeting time. He looked at the door to the Leaky Cauldron, then began walking down the street.

He had been taking Muggle Studies for almost four years, and yet had spent very little time in the muggle world itself. Just brief moments, racing through King's Cross. He knew, in theory, how to navigate it.

The Leaky Cauldron was in a low traffic area of London. The flats that rose around him were dark and silent. Rubbish blew along the street. Empty and broken bottles were trapped in gutters. Old gum stains and cigarette butts were ground into the concrete. Concrete was a composite material muggles used in building.

After the first block, the muggle world violently asserted itself. Percy was overwhelmed. There were so many people. So many different kinds of people. He had thought Diagon Alley was busy. He had known that London was home to nearly seven million people. That number looked much smaller on paper than in person. People laughing, people smoking, people shopping. Houses and flats and businesses. The rumble of cars, of tall red buses, the honking, the shouting. Flashing lights. A zebra crossing, a pelican crossing. A green man to walk, a red man to not walk. What was it Professor Burbage had said?

"Green means go, red means stop. Yellow means slow down, or drive faster if you're feeling lucky!"

The buildings towered over him, the light rain slid off his glasses. Percy realized it would make him stand out among all the other glass pearly with water, but was too fascinated by the sights and sounds.

He wished Harry was with him.

Percy came across a building that stood at a rather confusing intersection. Piccadilly Circus, mobs of people moving in and out of shops. There was a yellow banner with red words in the

window. *Tower Records*. Curious, Percy went inside.

Percy leaned against the wall outside of the Leaky Cauldron. He'd had to apparate home, find Hermes, apparate back. He was still early. He had time.

He looked up and down the street. It was empty.

He took the small vial out of his coat. There was barely any left. He couldn't risk brewing more at home. He only needed enough for the evening, though. He could get through the evening.

The glass vial was warm in his hand. Enticing. Percy pulled out the cork, dread and anticipation making his heart race. He caught the cloying scent of old roses, put the vial to his lips, swallowed the sweet concoction. It burned going down, left his lips and throat numb, his tongue dry. His eyes fluttered shut as the potion hit him. It flooded his entire body, soaked his mind. He felt warm, wrapped in quilts. His skin tingled, his pulse quickened. He was floating, detached from his body. He forgot about his disease, he forgot about his family, he forgot about how broken he felt, forgot about the pain. It was a rush, it was a relief. Nothing mattered as his world reoriented itself around Penelope Clearwater. Around some vague desire, a craving that the potion demanded Penelope Clearwater sate. It didn't matter how Percy felt about it because, with this, nothing felt bad.

He wanted to cry.

"It's so good to see you again, Percy," Catherine Clearwater said, kissing him on the cheek. Percy could still feel the grit of pearl dust on his teeth. The flagging butterflies in his stomach. He smiled.

"Percy, how are you?" Reginald Clearwater asked, shaking his hand vigorously.

Penelope Clearwater took his arm. She was pretty and smart. A perfect young woman. Looking into her eyes was like drowning face down in a shallow pool, drowning the steady chant of her name in his mind.

They were inside the Leaky Cauldron. It was warm and light with laughter and good cheer. A Christmas tree had been shoved into a corner, its crown bowed under the ceiling.

The fireplace flared green, and Great-Aunt Muriel stepped out, a dead fox hanging around her neck. Her black robes could pass for a dress. Her hair was a nest of grey and white coils, and she had the mien of a bird of prey as she scowled around the room.

“There you are, Percival,” she said, marching towards him, her cane stabbing into the floor.

“Good evening, Auntie Muriel,” Percy said, warily watching her approach.

“You look like a scarecrow,” she said, looking him up and down.

“Thank you,” Percy said. “I shall take that under advisement.”

His aunt cackled, then noticed the Clearwaters. “Hmm.”

“Penelope, Mr. and Mrs. Clearwater, this is my Great-Aunt Muriel Prewett,” Percy said, detaching himself from Penelope Clearwater to stand next to his aunt. “Auntie Muriel, this is Penelope Clearwater and her parents, Reginald and Catherine Clearwater.”

His aunt squinted her bloodshot eyes as she scrutinized them. “Nice to meet you.”

Percy was floored. He had never heard his aunt greet someone so kindly in his entire life, though it did sound like someone was pulling her remaining teeth. He stood silently as the Clearwaters and his aunt exchanged pleasantries, smiling.

Mr. Clearwater checked his watch. “Our car should be here.”

“Car?” Auntie Muriel asked. “One of those muggle contraptions?”

“With a muggle driver,” Mr. Clearwater said proudly.

“Father likes seeing how the other half lives,” Penelope Clearwater whispered conspiratorially.

Auntie Muriel grunted, but amazingly didn’t complain. What had Percy’s mother said to her?

They walked out of the Leaky Cauldron to find a handsome sedan waiting for them. A Rolls-Royce, as Mr. Clearwater explained, with facing back seats. Mr. Clearwater held open a door for his wife, and Percy hurried forward to do the same for Penelope Clearwater and Auntie Muriel, who was scowling at the sky. One of the fox stole’s legs got tangled in the seatbelt. Once everyone was settled, the car began moving. There was conversation, but Percy could barely pay attention. He was torn between anxiety over his aunt, and the urge to admire Penelope Clearwater.

“So, Percy, Madam Prewett,” Mrs. Clearwater began. “Has there been much word on the flying carpet embargo?”

Auntie Muriel waved her hand. “They tried that years ago. It’s codswallop.” The dead fox’s tail swung.

“What do you think about it, Percy?” Mrs. Clearwater asked.

Percy tore his eyes away from Penelope Clearwater. He had an answer for this. He had overheard Harry’s conversation with his friend Phoebe Alderton, granddaughter of broomstick designer Arkie Alderton.

Percy nodded at something Penelope said, hoping it was the appropriate response. He was too invested in the conversation happening at the table behind him.

“Grandpa told me that Nimbus is developing a family-sized broom,” Alderton said.

“So they think flying carpets will impact domestic sales,” Harry said. “You’re never going to be able to fit as many people on a broom as on a carpet. Imagine how long the broom would have to be. And don’t even start, Adrian. I’ll ride a fucking doily if I want.”

“I believe we have excellent forms of transportation in Britain,” Percy said neutrally.

“Well said,” Mr. Clearwater said, lifting a tumbler filled with firewhiskey. Percy hadn’t even seen him pour the drink.

Once they arrived at the theater, Percy helped Penelope Clearwater out of the car. When he held out his arm for his aunt to take, she gripped it tightly in her bony fingers.

“The things I do...” Auntie Muriel muttered, glaring at the fox’s glassy-eyed face. “Let’s get this over with, Percival.”

Ushers greeted them, handed them programs, escorted them to their seats. Auntie Muriel, Percy, Penelope Clearwater, Mr. and Mrs. Clearwater, all in a row. Auntie Muriel grumbled and flipped through the program, squinting at the pages describing what the ballet was about, about costumers, directors, choreographers, set designers, donors. The Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier. Columbine and Harlequin.

Penelope Clearwater slipped her hand into his, and his body sagged in relief. Her hand was weak and cold. It was perfect. So perfect.

He was glad when the music began. Harry had liked listening to the record.

Children began dancing on stage. Penelope Clearwater squeezed his hand. Auntie Muriel coughed wetly into her fox’s tail, drawing looks of disgust.

Adults dressed as toys emerged from gift boxes to dance.

Percy looked at the orchestra. Harry had said he had liked listening to this. He had a record of it. He looked back at the stage. One child grabbed a toy from another, a nutcracker, and dashed it on the ground. Auntie Muriel cackled.

Penelope Clearwater let go of his hand to clap with the crowd. Percy clapped too.

The Christmas tree on stage grew larger. More applause.

“Your mother used to do that when she was a little girl,” Auntie Muriel said in a loud whisper. “Do muggles really think that sort of thing is impressive?”

Adults dressed as mice began running across the stage. Children dressed as soldiers engaged them in battle.

A nutcracker fought a seven-headed mouse king. A girl in a nightgown threw a slipper at the mouse king, and he was then slain by the nutcracker.

Auntie Muriel coughed.

Penelope Clearwater patted him on the knee when the nutcracker became a prince. He smiled, and smiled, and smiled.

Auntie Muriel started coughing more during intermission. Smoke crawled out of the doors to the smoker's lounge. She clutched Percy's arm, dragging him away from Penelope Clearwater.

"Auntie Muriel," he said, unsure of what to do. "Are you alright?"

"Do I sound alright?" she wheezed. "Take me home, Percival. This muggle air isn't good for me."

"I'm so sorry," Percy said, turning back to the Clearwaters. "I need to escort my aunt home. I should be back before the second act."

Penelope Clearwater frowned in concern, checking her watch.

Auntie Muriel coughed louder.

"Perhaps St. Mungo's would be better," Percy said, helping his elderly aunt walk outside, people clearing a path for them.

Percy got Auntie Muriel halfway down the block before she seized him and apparated them away.

Percy was dropped onto a fainting couch. He couldn't move. Based on the crown molding, he appeared to be in Auntie Muriel's drawing room.

"You stay there," Auntie Muriel said, sounding completely fine. He heard her walking away, her cane thumping on the floor. Several minutes later she returned. Percy was unperturbed, but before he could sit up and demand what was going on, Auntie Muriel grabbed his head and forced something small and hard into his mouth.

“Swallow,” she commanded, and Percy did before he could choke.

He felt like he had been dropped into the freezing ocean. He sat upright, nearly knocking his aunt over, pushed his glasses up and covered his eyes before he could start crying.

“That little upstart used a love potion on you,” Auntie Muriel said darkly. Percy shook his head. He didn’t want to cry in front of his aunt. Everything was too bright, too clear. It hurt.

“What have I been doing?” Percy whispered, horrified.

“When I get my hands on that skinny neck of hers,” Auntie Muriel growled. “A love potion! On my nephew!”

Percy shook his head again. “It wasn’t her.”

“Don’t lie to me, boy!” she snapped, grabbing his wrists. Percy looked into her enraged eyes. “I’m one hundred and three years old! You think I don’t know a love potion when I see one? You’ve been staring moon-eyed at that girl all night! Half the words that come out of your mouth are her name! The Percival I know can barely keep his opinions to himself, and yet you’re nodding along to dross!”

“It wasn’t her,” Percy said, looking down. “It was me. I did it to myself.”

Auntie Muriel was silent for a moment, then she began shaking him. “Are you an idiot? Did your mother put you up to this?”

“No,” Percy said.

“Explain,” Auntie Muriel demanded. “Is there someone else? Another woman?”

Percy shook his head again. This was horrible. This was the worst.

“A man?” Auntie Muriel asked.

Percy froze, panic strangling him.

Auntie Muriel laughed wheezily. “Don’t bother answering me, I can tell. Merlin, Percival, you can’t change something like that! Stupid child. It’s that Weasley blood, not a lick of sense in any of you.”

“I...I need to go back,” Percy said, looking around frantically. How could he get away without hurting her? “Seeing as you are well, I’m afraid I must—”

Auntie Muriel jabbed him in the chest. “You are staying right there, young man, if I have to tie you up! We are going to have a conversation about this.”

A Very Happy Christmas

Chapter Summary

Christmas 1993

Chapter Notes

Still love and appreciate the comments, you guys are fantastic :)

Here's some [fanart](#) for this chapter by NoiteCorDeRosa!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Percy dipped his quill and started another line.

“Did your mother put you up to this?”

He was acutely aware of the repetitive scratching sound of his quill. He wrote slowly, deliberately. The twins would sometimes claim they could hear it and would stomp around in protest. Percy didn't believe them, but he also didn't want to wake anyone up so early on Christmas morning. It was bad enough he hadn't slept. The day did not need to be further jeopardized.

Percy rubbed his chest absently. He felt strangely empty. Drained. Nothing a good meal and a good night's sleep couldn't fix.

He had barely made it back to the show in time, just as intermission ended. He did have to threaten Auntie Muriel with telling his mother about her attempted delay. It wasn't an ideal position, their stalemate. Whatever Auntie Muriel *thought* she knew was perfect fodder for her gossip.

Percy had, admittedly, been caught on the wrong foot. It wouldn't happen again. Claiming he was dosing himself with love potions simply because he was nervous—an idea he plausibly could have got from his mother's girlhood dalliances—would only work so many times.

He stopped writing and pushed his glasses up. The bezoar had hollowed him out. It was just the absence of potions he was feeling.

Someday he would look back on this and laugh. Just like his parents.

“Oi! Presents!”

Monty pushed the pillow Ron had thrown at him onto the floor then slapped around his bedside table for his glasses. He’d been reading about hippogriffs and manticores and nundus attacking people for days. He’d barely seen Harry, or Luna.

He had never looked forward to Christmas before starting Hogwarts. His first year getting presents had been a shock. Not only getting something from Mrs. Weasley, but getting his dad’s invisibility cloak and all those pictures of his mum.

The second year he had been tentatively looking forward to it, and made two new friends even if he rarely got to spend time with them.

Monty had been hoping for a repeat of the previous year, but between Buckbeak’s upcoming hearing, and Ron and Hermione hanging around, there wasn’t much hope for that. He doubted Ron would have agreed to everyone remaining in the castle opening presents together, not when they could be delivered to the foot of his bed.

“Happy Christmas,” he mumbled, pushing himself upright. He hoped Harry would like the present he had got him.

“Another jumper from mum,” Ron said, sounding annoyed. “Maroon *again*. See if you’ve got one.”

Monty ignored the way Ron’s lack of gratitude made him feel and opened up his own package from Mrs. Weasley. He had also got a jumper, a scarlet one with a Gryffindor lion. He hadn’t known Mrs. Weasley could knit designs like that. It was impressive, and it made him feel...warm. There were a few more presents underneath, and he decided to open them from smallest to largest, happy that he even had enough presents to open them in any order at all.

The smallest one was from Luna. It was a little owl, made out of bone, wood, and stone wired together, and two chips of amber for the eyes. He set it carefully on his bedside table and picked up the next package, which had the weight and shape of books. Monty unwrapped it, and saw the one on top was called *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. A note had been slipped between the pages.

This is one of my favorite books, and I hope you like it too. Happy Christmas.

Monty smiled and put the note back.

The last package was something long and thin, and he pulled it towards himself.

“What’s that?” Ron asked, putting on his new pair of maroon socks. Monty had no idea what his issue was with the color.

“Don’t know,” Monty said, opening the package.

A Firebolt rolled out.

Severus stared at the set of solid gold scales and weights his son had gifted him. More baffling was the box of comice pears Burbage had sent him from France.

He placed one of the pears on the scale and watched it reach equilibrium. He was speechless.

Harry felt a little melancholic Christmas morning. He had wanted to spend it with Monty, with his dad, with Luna.

He popped his retainers out and put them away, then looked at the small pile at the foot of his bed. It was larger than the year before. He had presents from Mrs. Weasley, his friends, Monty, Luna, his dad, and Percy. He stared at the package from Percy the longest, wondering whether to open it first or last.

Harry started with Mrs. Weasley’s since he wasn’t very close to her. She had sent him a tin filled with toffee, and a black jumper knitted with the Slytherin snake. Smiling, Harry pulled it on. He hadn’t expected a repeat of the previous year.

He opened Luna’s present next. It was a braided bracelet made out of some kind of black thread. Holding it up, Harry realized it was hair. Thestral hair.

Putting aside the matter of Luna sneaking into the Forbidden Forest to collect thestral hair, Harry tied it on.

His friends had sent him various sweets, chocolates, and books, including what looked like a torrid werewolf romance from Adrian of all people.

Harry picked up an unlabelled package, which he knew was from his dad. Opening it, he found a small case of vials filled with a pale lilac potion. There was a note inside.

This is a variant of Dreamless Sleep which I have developed. It does not prevent the drinker from dreaming entirely, but makes dreams more indistinct. See the attached modified recipe.

Harry stared at the vials. How long had his dad spent working on this? He set the case down carefully, taking a moment to compose himself before opening Monty's gift to him. Harry read the note first.

Dear Harry,

I know you like arithmancy a lot. I saw this in a catalogue Hermione has and I read that this would be useful. I hope you like it!

Happy Christmas,

Monty

Harry smiled to himself, then unwrapped his present. It was a small box with the words *Pocket Chalkboard*. Intrigued, Harry removed a black square from the box. It was the size of a postage stamp. He felt along the edge for a seam, then began unfolding it. Once, twice, thrice, it kept doubling in size. When it got to the size of his bed, Harry gave up on finding an end to it. He was a little concerned it wouldn't fold up again, but it did so easily. He stared at the little thing in his hand. He wouldn't have to go through so much ink and parchment anymore.

Finally, he picked up the package from Percy. He had no idea what to expect, but a yellow plastic bag from Tower Records certainly wasn't it. When had Percy gone to Tower? How had he even *heard* about Tower? Harry hadn't even been there. Harry squeezed the bag a little, and was even more confused. Turning it over, he watched the contents slide onto his bed. It was a shirt, a CD and a note.

Harry picked up the note.

This was released after school began. Happy Christmas, Harry.

Harry stared at the CD. It was *In Utero*, by Nirvana. How did Percy even know he liked them? Harry couldn't recall a single conversation about it. He put his face in his hands. He should have sent Percy something better. He felt like a complete tit. He needed to buy a CD player.

When he lifted his head again, he noticed another package. It didn't say who it was from. Curious, Harry carefully opened it.

Harry stared at the book. "What the fuck?"

Percy set his quill down as the sky began to lighten, leaning back in his chair.

"Stubborn like your mother, and reckless like your father!"

It wasn't his best moment, Auntie Muriel's hawk-like eyes scrutinizing him. Judging him. Trying to pry his secrets from him. At least she had some awareness of socially acceptable behavior and recognized vanishing in the middle of a show would be rude. On Christmas Eve, no less. And Percy had wanted to see the second act. True, he barely recalled the first, but that was a minor detail.

"Bezoars aren't cheap, boy!"

Grimacing, Percy stood up from his desk. It was Christmas morning. Christmas was supposed to be happy.

He could hear his mother already moving around the kitchen, so he went down to help her. She was always doing something. Cooking, cleaning, sewing, knitting. Industrious. It would be a while until the rest of the family got up. Presents waited around the Christmas tree, wrapped in pretty paper. Percy didn't know whether he was looking forward to it, or looking forward to it being over.

"Good morning, mother," Percy said as he walked into the kitchen.

She turned around and beamed at him. "Good morning! And Happy Christmas, dear. You're up early! You got in rather late last night."

Percy felt his gorge rise. He sat at the kitchen table. He had to manage his public image. This was nothing compared to the sort of scandals he might face in the Ministry. Auntie Muriel was just one person, and she had the habit of regularly insulting everyone in her vicinity. No one took her seriously. Using a love potion was embarrassing, true, but they were common enough to not be of particular note. No one else had to know.

He was startled when his mother placed tea in front of him. "How was it?"

Percy frowned at her. "How was what?"

"The ballet!" his mother said.

“Oh, yes, of course,” Percy said. He’d had all night to come up with something. “It was excellent.”

He told his mother about *The Nutcracker*, about Penelope and her parents, that Auntie Muriel had been just fine, omitting their interlude. If he stuck to only talking about what happened in the ballet, he would be safe. It helped pass the time until the others came downstairs.

Soon enough, his family was assembled around the Christmas tree, passing presents to each other. He got the usual jumper and socks from his mother, a pressed flower Ginny had turned into a bookmark, an unmarked package.

Percy pulled it onto his lap.

“Is that from Penelope?” Ginny asked innocently.

“No, those were the tickets last night,” Percy said absently. He didn’t want to remember giving her the locket, the chaste kiss that made his skin crawl with how wrong it felt. The knowing looks from her parents. From his parents. Auntie Muriel.

Percy unwrapped the package. Inside there was a Bounty bar, and a bottle of something called Ribena. The parchment that had been used as wrapping had a note inside.

It’s not exactly butterbeer, but I hope you like it. It’s squash, so you mix it with water.

“I wonder who that’s from,” George said, grinning at him.

“Oh, are those muggle sweets?” his dad asked, leaning over. “Fascinating!”

“You’ve got a present from us too,” Fred said, matching George’s grin. “We left it in your room.”

“You what?” Percy exclaimed, jumping up. He ran to his room, wondering what his brothers could have unleashed. Once inside, he slammed the door behind him, then looked down at his hands. He’d brought Harry’s gifts with him. Setting them carefully on his bed, he looked around to see what was different.

There, on his desk, was a magazine. Right next to the list he had been writing, foolishly left out in the open. His brothers must have seen it.

Mortified, Percy found his wand and examined the magazine. The cover said it was *Spellbound*, with a picture of Gilderoy Lockhart on the cover. Suspicious, Percy carefully opened it up.

He stumbled into his bed, falling backwards. Panicking, he lurched forward and closed the magazine again. Then he picked it up and shoved it under his mattress for good measure. How had the twins even got such a thing?

Percy sat on his bed again, gripping his hair.

“Merlin, Percival, you can’t change something like that!”

It was just a joke. Just another stupid prank. There was no possibility Fred and George could think he was interested in that sort of thing. None whatsoever. This was going too far.

Was it too soon to go back to Hogwarts? He should have just stayed at school.

Hermione was acting weird about the Firebolt.

Monty agreed that someone anonymously sending him a very expensive broom was unusual, but it seemed a very roundabout way to try to kill him. Why not send something cheaper if it was cursed? And if it was so easy to owl cursed items to Hogwarts, why did Sirius Black need to break in at all?

Not wanting to endure Hermione’s staring—particularly not with her and Ron at odds over Crookshanks’ tearing up Ron’s pajamas while trying to attack Scabbers yet again—Monty ignored Hermione’s protests, wrapped his broom in his invisibility cloak, and fled Gryffindor Tower. He just couldn’t deal with them that morning. All the shouting and bickering. It was Christmas. He wanted to have a nice day.

A few corridors away, Monty took out the Marauder’s Map. It looked like Luna was still in Ravenclaw Tower, but Harry was somewhere on the first floor. Monty put the map away and ran downstairs.

When he got to the corridor Harry was in, Monty saw him furtively leaving a room. He had on a black jumper with a green snake. Had Mrs. Weasley sent it to him?

“Happy Christmas!” Monty said.

Harry didn’t look surprised to see him. “Happy Christmas, Monty. Thank you for your gift, it looks dead useful.”

“Thank you for the books, I can’t wait to read them,” Monty said honestly.

Harry smiled shyly. “I didn’t know what kind of fiction you might like.”

“If you like them, I’m sure they’re good,” Monty said.

“I hope so,” Harry said. “What’s that you’ve got?”

“Oh,” Monty said, unwrapping his invisibility cloak to reveal the Firebolt. “Someone sent this to me.”

“A Firebolt?” Harry asked, taking out his wand and frowning in concentration.

“You don’t think it’s cursed, do you?” Monty asked.

“It would be an expensive way to curse someone,” Harry said. Monty was inordinately pleased at having had the same thought. Harry began muttering spells that Monty couldn’t follow. “There wasn’t a note?”

“No,” Monty said, holding out the broom.

“You’re already touching it and nothing has happened,” Harry said, looking at him again. “Still, it’s strange. A broom is a relatively safe gift to give someone you don’t know well, they’re almost guaranteed to like it. But a Firebolt suggests the person knows you’re a seeker.”

“I guess,” Monty said. He hadn’t given or received enough gifts to know. “I was going to test it out. Ron wanted to try it too, but he got hurt trying to kick Crookshanks.” That, and Ron was in high dudgeon. Him and Hermione both.

“Serves him right,” Harry said. “And it’s a bit rude to ask someone to use a present they’ve just got.”

“Is it?” Monty asked. “I didn’t think so.”

“Then you’re not as selfish as most people,” Harry said with a smile. “Your friend Hermione’s a bit of a tattletale, so if you want to give it a test run we best hurry. If anyone asks, I strongly objected to the idea.”

Percy had forgotten Auntie Muriel was joining them for Christmas dinner. He could not recall a more disastrous holiday.

As much as being caught using a love potion had rattled him, Percy knew that Auntie Muriel’s intervention had been well-intentioned. He was no longer trapped in its fog, and he was forced to think through what, exactly, he had hoped to achieve. It was not sustainable. He didn’t know if he could tolerate being around Penelope without it.

What would Harry think about it?

Percy shied away from that line of inquiry, turning to greet Auntie Muriel as she emerged from the fireplace like a vengeful wraith.

“Is that you, Arthur?” she croaked. “I thought a garden gnome had got into the Skele-Gro.”

“Happy Christmas, Muriel,” his father said, smiling indulgently.

“Auntie Muriel!” his mother cried, hurrying forward. “It’s so good to see you!”

Auntie Muriel cackled. “It wouldn’t kill you to visit me in Godric’s Hollow! Merlin’s beard, Molly, are you pregnant again?”

His mother froze, her cheeks pinking, her smile turning brittle.

“Arthur and I are past that point in our lives,” she said evenly.

“Good,” Auntie Muriel said. “You have enough children to coddle. Percival! Where are you?”

“Happy Christmas,” Percy said, stepping up to her. His aunt seized his face and looked him in the eyes.

She sniffed, then muttered, “Don’t think I’ve forgotten. I’m not giving my seat to some spineless jellyfish.”

“You’re a Prewett, boy! Have some pride!”

She released him, and Percy nodded stiffly. Auntie Muriel turned to glare at Fred and George.

“What are you two smirking at?” she demanded. “And where’s Ginevra?”

Percy watched his mother guide Auntie Muriel into the dining room while she sniped at everyone around her. It took a moment for her words to register.

I’m not giving my seat to some spineless jellyfish.

Surely she couldn’t mean—

“Percival!” his aunt shrieked.

Percy walked into the dining room, wondering what fresh hell awaited him.

“Where have you been?” Hermione demanded as Monty entered the common room, grinning like a fool. The Firebolt was *amazing*. “You haven’t been flying that broom, have you?”

She sounded near hysterical, and Monty felt a little bad for running off. “Just needed some fresh air,” he said. Harry had reminded him that brooms could fly, and that it would look pretty obvious if he was holding something invisible, so his broom was innocently floating next to him.

“It’s almost lunchtime, so I was coming to get you two,” Monty said.

Ron grunted. He still seemed upset about Crookshanks. Monty had no idea what Hermione had been thinking, carrying her cat into their dormitory. Especially after Percy had warned her.

He went up to his dormitory to put away his cloak and stash his Firebolt, then left Gryffindor Tower with Ron and Hermione. He hoped the feast would improve their moods.

In the Great Hall there was a single table set. The headmaster and all the heads of house were there, as well as Filch and Mrs. Norris, whose tail Lady Madeleine was jumping on. Harry was there with Luna, as well as the shy first-year boy Derek. Luna waved happily to him. For whatever reason, she was looking at him through a pair of hot pink opera glasses. He hoped she liked the journal he'd got her.

Monty would have preferred to sit with Harry and Luna, but he settled for sitting across from them.

"Merry Christmas!" Dumbledore said. At his side, Snape rolled his eyes, taking the other end of a wizarding cracker. There was an explosion, and a hat topped with a stuffed vulture emerged.

Harry covered his face, his shoulders shaking with laughter. Snape looked deeply unamused by this reminder of Neville's boggart, and pushed the hat at the headmaster, who happily donned it.

"Do you want to pull one?" Monty asked Luna, holding a cracker out to her.

Together, they pulled it apart in a cloud of smoke and glitter. Several mice fell out and scurried across the table, Mrs. Norris and Lady Madeleine giving chase, as well as a dancing sunflower Alice band which Luna immediately put on.

Monty watched Harry pull a cracker with Derek. A silver crown clattered onto the table. Harry hesitated for a moment, then he smiled good naturedly and put it on.

Ron and Hermione loosened up as they were showered with small gifts and ridiculous hats. Luna fell out of her seat laughing at Hermione's square cap.

"Let the feast begin!" Dumbledore exclaimed.

Monty shared a smile with Harry, and they tucked in.

It was inevitable the conversation would turn to Penelope. Percy thought he was prepared.

"How did you enjoy the ballet?" his mother asked Auntie Muriel.

His aunt grunted. “Muggle rubbish. Those muggles, so easily entertained! Growing trees, turning people into rats!”

“Did they really turn people into rats?” his father asked.

“They were in mice costumes,” Percy said, keeping his eyes on his food. He was feeling slightly dizzy and knew he needed to eat more. He’d have to see Madam Pomfrey about his dosage again, unless he decided to keep potioning himself. Would his aunt want to give their family’s legacy to someone so weak?

“What did you think about Penelope?” his mother asked. “I can’t wait to meet her!”

Auntie Muriel snorted, and Percy felt an impending sense of doom. “She looks like a bowtruckle in a wig, and is just as pesky.”

Percy glanced at Auntie Muriel. His indignant blustering hadn’t allayed her suspicions, not by a long shot.

“Percy’s got a list in his room about all the things he finds *acceptable* about Penelope,” Fred said in a loud whisper, grinning at him.

Percy went completely red. Ginny giggled, hiding her face.

“Couldn’t say *like*, could you, Perce?” George said with a smirk.

“That was *private*,” Percy said tightly. “I don’t snoop around your room. You could at least have *some* respect for the privacy of others!”

“Oh, that is so sweet of you, Percy!” his mother gushed.

Auntie Muriel started laughing, while his father smiled in confusion. Just then, there was a muted blast from under Auntie Muriel’s chair, accompanied by a cloud of putrid yellow smoke and the rank stench of dung.

Auntie Muriel shrieked and leapt out of her seat, almost falling as she tried to escape the dungbomb. Percy caught her before she could break her hip. She ripped her arm away and stormed out of the room. A moment later, the floo flared up and she was gone. The twins laughed maniacally, Ginny ran from the room, their mother shouted at the twins, their father vanished the smoke, and Percy wondered what he was even doing in this family.

Chapter End Notes

And that was the last the Weasleys ever saw of Auntie Muriel

Potions for Hags

Chapter Summary

December 1993

“Where did you get the scales?” Severus asked.

“I found them.”

“Found them where?” he asked.

“In a pile of junk,” Harry said, smiling slightly. “I didn’t steal them, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Severus sighed, leaving Harry’s mind. “Very well.” His child could lie to him now. Or maybe Harry was telling the truth, he couldn’t tell. What had he created? “What was it you wished to speak with me about?”

“Can’t I just want to visit?” Harry asked. “I don’t always show up when I need something.”

“That’s as may be,” he said. “There was a sense of apprehension in your mind.”

Harry looked put out. “There *is* something. You know that broom Monty got?”

“I do,” he said. McGonagall could barely contain her excitement even as she delivered the Firebolt to Flitwick.

“I got something too,” Harry said, reaching into his robes and pulling out a thick book. Severus rolled his eyes. Harry had got into the habit of putting undetectable extension charms everywhere he could, now that he had mastered it. Severus wasn’t even sure where his son had learned the spell, given it was Ministry regulated.

Harry set the book on his desk, and Severus pulled it towards himself.

“Someone sent you a book on legal guidelines?” he asked.

“That book costs five hundred galleons,” Harry said. “I can count on one hand the number of people who know that specific interest of mine. Of those, only you or Monty could afford it.”

Severus picked up his wand. “Have you any suspicions?”

Harry had a troubled look. “Cedric’s dad works for the Ministry. It’s possible a copy was issued to him. But I think Cedric would have put his name. I don’t know how he would know,

though.”

Severus cast a few spells, trying to uncover any secrets the book might hold. “Is Diggory giving you trouble?”

Harry shook his head. “You don’t have to pick on Hufflepuffs anymore.”

Severus humphed, then began methodically flipping through the pages. There were many vectors for potions, many ways in which unfriendly magic might manifest.

“You got pears?”

Severus looked up from the book, saw Harry examining the box of pears.

“It’s a really nice box,” Harry said, turning to him. “Is it made out of pear wood?”

“Perhaps,” Severus said. “Would you like one? I’ve yet to try them.”

“Really?” Harry asked. “I know it’s your favorite fruit.”

“I *am* capable of sharing,” Severus said drily.

Harry narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

Severus sighed. “They are not drugged.”

“Maybe later,” Harry said. “How is breaking the Defense curse going?”

“Glacially,” he said. The best he could conclude was that the object was within Hogwarts, but the specific location kept changing. And there was the question of *how* the curse would be broken, which the headmaster was frustratingly silent on. They needed a new perspective.

He looked at the pears again.

“I hope it does get broken,” Harry said. “Professor Lupin’s a really good teacher. You’re a good teacher too,” he added hastily.

Severus stared at his son.

“I’m going to go to the library,” Harry said abruptly, standing up. “It was nice talking to you.”

Severus watched his son walk out of his office, quietly shutting the door behind him.

“Insolent brat.”

Harry sat on his bed, moving the dials on his wireless. The wireless which Percy had given him. He wondered how motivated his dad was to break the curse on the Defense post, if it meant Lupin would stay on. He knew his dad had applied to teach Defense, it was common knowledge. There were plenty of theories floating around as to why his dad never got the job, his allegedly being too interested in the dark arts being the predominant one. Knowing the curse was legitimate, it was clear that Dumbledore didn't want his dad to fall victim to it.

Or perhaps it was equally hard to find someone to teach Potions?

Sighing, Harry continued to search through the airwaves. He really wanted to listen to the CD Percy had sent him. That he had sent Harry anything at all was a surprise, much less muggle items.

He didn't know what was going on with Percy. Ever since summer holidays ended they hadn't really spoken. Percy seemed to be avoiding him. Was it because he had been dating Cedric? Percy didn't come off as prejudiced, and he hadn't seemed to mind before. Did Penelope have a problem with it? He had never thought of Percy as someone to cave to another's opinion, and it would be disappointing if he had. Perhaps Percy was just busy, and didn't have time for him.

"Teenage angst has paid off well, now I'm bored and old..."

Harry laid back on his bed. How had Percy known what kind of music he liked? Harry didn't talk about the muggle world *that* often. The only time he could recall talking about the band was during an argument with Astrid about the Weird Sisters. Had Percy been nearby?

Harry sat up and grabbed the CD. He *had* been. Percy had been sitting at the Ravenclaw table with Penelope. Had he been listening the whole time?

He set the CD back down. Percy probably didn't even know CD players existed.

"If she floats then she is not a witch like we had thought..."

Harry still had the Ministry internship application, stuffed into his bag. There was a good chance Percy would be working for the Ministry after he graduated. Harry couldn't see Percy settling for anything else. If Harry got the internship, maybe he'd be able to see Percy over the summer.

"Serve the servants..."

Not wanting to dwell on it, Harry got out of his bed, grabbed his bag, and headed for the Owlery. He had some letters to send.

The Firebolt had caused another rift in their friendship.

Monty was a little annoyed with Hermione, but he understood why she had gone to Professor McGonagall. He couldn't exactly say he had already flown it and it was perfectly fine, not without implicating himself. And he didn't want to say Harry had been there just in case anything happened, because that would get Harry in trouble, especially since he was a prefect.

Ron, however, was furious.

Monty found himself wishing yet again his friends hadn't chosen to stay at Hogwarts. Ron stayed in the common room all day, Hermione was in the library, and they both were miserable to be around. It did give him a break from reading a bunch of old law books and feeling way in over his head, and from the whole Crookshanks and Scabbers thing. But it reminded him too much of first year, when Hermione didn't have any friends, and Monty felt bad for her.

Trying to explain this to Ron went nowhere, as he was committed to being angry with Hermione. Monty couldn't really blame him, given how many times Crookshanks had tried to kill Scabbers, and Hermione brushing it off. But it was starting to make Ron mad at him too, because, in Ron's mind, Monty was choosing Hermione's side. It came up every time Monty wanted to go to the library.

Hermione wasn't the only person in the library though, nor even the main reason Monty wanted to go there. He knew Luna was there sometimes, to read or to draw. That first-year Derek was around too, and he seemed okay, if extremely quiet. And Harry, who Monty knew spent almost all of his free time in the Restricted Section.

Monty pulled his invisibility cloak close and stepped over the velvet rope. Was the rope meant to do anything? Shaking his head, he padded down the aisles, not wanting to be distracted by any of the books. The first, and last, time he'd taken one of the books without permission, it had screamed bloody murder at him, and kept screaming even after he had closed it.

He found Harry at a table near the windows, kneeling on a chair and leaning over the chalkboard Monty had given him. Monty was happy to see it was something Harry could, and would, use. He hadn't been sure.

"What are you doing back here?" Harry asked quietly, not looking up from his equations.

"My Firebolt got confiscated," Monty said, taking his cloak off. "Now Ron and Hermione are fighting again."

"You've still got your Nimbus," Harry said, writing something down. "I'm not sure why Weasley's so concerned. It's not his broom."

"I think it's the principle," Monty said, finding a seat for himself. "McGonagall said Madam Hooch and Flitwick were going to strip it down."

Harry frowned, then looked up at him. "That broom has proprietary charms. They can't just take them off, they don't even know what they are. Firebolts are handmade by Randolph

Spudmore himself. God knows I've heard enough about him from Terence and Phoebe. The man's a genius."

"I don't think that's Ron's reason," Monty said, bemused. "Anyway, I needed a break."

Harry nodded, then sat down cross legged in his chair. "It's hard being around the same people all the time. You live together, sleep in the same room in some cases, have all the same classes, have meals together. Having an argument makes that all really awkward."

Monty shifted in his seat. "What are you working on?"

Harry picked up something Monty hadn't noticed, as it had blended in with the blackboard. It was his toy thestral, Benjy.

"I'm trying to fix him," Harry said, frowning at the tiny, limp thestral. "It's sort of related to your Firebolt issue. If just anyone knew and could use the charms your broom has, no one would ever need to buy a Firebolt. They could make their own. The price reflects all the years Spudmore spent researching and developing those spells, though I'm sure it's inflated since he can control how many are actually made."

"So you're going to invent spells to fix him?" Monty asked.

"Well, *one* spell," Harry said, looking around at the chalkboard. It was cluttered with numbers, different runes, and what looked French and Latin. Monty couldn't make sense of it. "This is, incidentally, not strictly legal."

"Because of what happened with Luna's mum?" Monty asked. "It's dangerous?"

"Extremely," Harry said. "Though I haven't done any magic yet, meaning I haven't attempted any spells."

Monty gave the chalkboard a skeptical look. He didn't see how any of it was related to inventing a spell.

"You have inventors in your family, too," Harry said.

Monty nodded. "My granddad, with the hair potion thing."

"That was his most famous one, yeah," Harry said. "But your ancestor Lindfred, who actually founded the Potter family, invented Skele-Gro and Pepperup, not that they were called that eight hundred years ago."

"I've taken Skele-Gro," Monty said, feeling both proud of his ancestor and slightly overwhelmed by this information.

Harry grinned. "Good thing he invented it, right?"

Monty nodded again, wishing he knew more about his family. Wishing his parents were alive to tell him. He sometimes felt like other people knew more about his own life, his own

history, than he did. He knew about the wizarding wars, though. About Grindelwald. About Voldemort. What the Boy Who Lived meant to the magical world.

“There’s still a lot of unexplored areas in potions,” Harry went on. “Most things you can do with a spell you can do with a potion. Look at Fizzing Whizzbees. They make you float, right? That’s a potion. They use billywig venom.”

“That’s a sweet, though,” Monty said, a little disgusted by having eaten something with bugs in it. Then again, plenty of the potions they made in class had animal parts.

“That’s potions,” Harry replied. “There are a ton of different kinds. Cosmetics, healing, poisons, food additives like in sweets. All those have their own subcategories, like potions for blood, bones, even your mind. There’s actually a really big subfield of potions that has been overlooked, mostly because no one has ever cared enough to develop it.”

“What’s that?” Monty asked.

“Potions for creatures,” Harry said. “And other magical peoples, other than fully human ones. Werewolves, vampires, centaurs, you name it. There was an article recently about some bloke named Regulus Moonshine. He’s developed a potion to suppress a hag’s appetite.”

Monty’s eyes widened. “Does it actually work?”

“He said the volunteers had stopped trying to eat him, so it sounds like it,” Harry said, grinning. “Anyway, it’s one way to not work for the Ministry. Making things to sell.”

“You don’t really like the Ministry, do you?” Monty asked.

Harry snorted. “That’s an understatement. But I’ve applied for an internship for next summer, so try to keep that to yourself. Being openly critical of our government isn’t going to win me any friends.”

“Then why do you want an internship?” Monty asked, confused.

To his surprise, Harry blushed.

“It would be a good experience,” Harry said. “So, besides your Firebolt drama, what else is going on?”

“Father?”

His father looked up from the object he had been tinkering with, a motor of some kind with a wavy, rectangular paddle attached to it. Percy had no idea what it was for, and suspected his father didn’t either.

“Percy, didn’t see you there,” his father said. “Did your mother send you to fetch me?”

“No,” he said. “There is something I wish to discuss with you.”

His father set his tools down. Some of those Percy could identify. Spanners and screwdrivers in different shapes and sizes.

“Is it about Penelope?” his dad asked with a smile. He pulled over a stool and gestured for Percy to sit. “Need some fatherly advice?”

Percy’s stomach clenched. He had thought about asking his parents what they really thought if he...but he knew he would no longer be the perfect son to his mother. As perfect as he could be, defective as he was.

“No,” Percy said, sitting down. “I wanted to discuss your proposed ban on flying carpets.”

“Ah, that,” he dad said, turning back to his project. “Very dodgy, those. More than a few have ended up in those muggle charity shops or one of their car boot sales. That doesn’t happen with brooms so much anymore. The kind we use to fly aren’t very good for sweeping.”

“I believe there are ways around that other than an outright ban,” Percy said. “Have you considered the repercussions?”

His father gave him a look. “Of course I have, Percy. There isn’t much of a call for carpets in Britain, nor are there many people making carpets here. Weaving’s really died out. I couldn’t believe some of the things we saw in Egypt, magic carpets sold side by side with muggle ones! No safety features, no muggle-repelling...” his father shook his head. “No, brooms have been our standard for centuries for a reason.”

Percy turned his head slightly to look at the Ford Anglia. The *flying* Ford Anglia, almost indistinguishable from any other model of the car. He wondered, for a moment, if his father was an idiot.

“I don’t think the ban will be popular abroad,” Percy said. “And not everyone is comfortable flying on a broom. What are people meant to do for a family vehicle?”

His father chuckled. “We’ve managed fine, haven’t we?”

Before Percy could respond, someone threw open the door to the shed and ran in.

“Mum’s calling you two for dinner,” Ginny said, trying and failing to hide a broomstick behind her back. Not being allowed on the house team hadn’t dimmed her enthusiasm for quidditch, and she had spent most of the holiday flying despite their mother’s protests. The healers said it was good for Ginny’s health.

His father patted his shoulder. “We can keep talking over dinner.”

Percy nodded, then stood to follow his father and sister back to the house. Meals weren’t exactly the best place for any discussion. One or all of his siblings would complain about him

talking about something *boring*. Everything he was interested in was boring to them, and he often felt like his parents were only humoring him.

He knew, both from conversations he'd overheard and his own guesses, that there was a vested commercial interest in banning flying carpets. Did his father's muggle paternalism simply happen to overlap with that protectionism, some happy coincidence? If the ban was successful, it would certainly make his father more popular with some in the Ministry.

Percy didn't think he'd be able to talk his father around.

He felt like the only sane person in his family.

He wanted to talk to Harry.

As he walked through the garden, watching some gnomes vault over the hedge when they thought no one was looking, Percy thought he smelled roses. Old roses.

It was so much easier on the potion. So much simpler. But it was fake. It didn't really change anything. It didn't really help. He hadn't even felt like himself, just a parody. A drooling sycophant.

Auntie Muriel was right. Where had his pride gone?

Once inside, Percy hung his cloak up with the others and joined his family in the kitchen.

"You have a letter from the school, dear," his mother said, passing a scroll to Percy. For some reason, Fred and George looked relieved it wasn't for them. Setting aside his suspicion, Percy opened the scroll.

I've sent in my application. I hope we get to work together.

Percy rolled it up again and shoved it into his robes.

"Who was it from?" his mother asked.

"Head Boy business," Percy said officiously. "I need to rearrange the rounds again. Safety issues, you know."

His mother beamed at him and began passing around the food. His father started some story about boots jinxed to untie themselves and trip the wearer. Everyone laughed. Flying carpet bans were forgotten.

Percy sat quietly and ate.

Mrs. Norris was starting to get suspicious. Lady Madeleine was doing her best, but she was only a kitten and had nothing on Mrs. Norris' years of experience. Harry was also concerned his brother might seek him out again. He didn't want to lie about what he was doing in Filch's office, and he was worried about what he would find.

It was slow going. Filch had over twenty years of records, organized in some manner Harry had yet to decrypt. The Marauder's Map had called itself an *aid to magical mischief-makers*, which made Harry think whoever made it were themselves mischief-makers, perhaps to the same extent as Fred and George. More, if the map was anything to go by.

Maybe their pseudonyms were a clue. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs. At least two of them had something to do with animals. Wormtail...a worm? A reptile? A marsupial? A rodent? Padfoot, obviously something with pads on its feet. That was most mammals. A cat? A dog? A bear? A squirrel? A weasel?

Had Percy got his note yet?

Harry wrinkled his nose. Padfoot. He could have sworn he had seen the name before. Sometimes he worried he read too much, titles and authors blurring together. It felt like something he had read recently, though.

Frustrated, he considered Prongs. What had prongs? A fork? Those were tines. An animal with prongs, something that stuck out...a hedgehog? Something with horns?

Moony. A barn owl? A mooncalf? A moon frog?

A small *meow* told Harry his time was up. He quickly put everything in Filch's office back where it had been, erased what traces of his presence he could, and legged it.

She was sitting on the roof again.

I shut the door behind me and took careful steps across the gravel. I didn't want to startle her, not so close to the edge. I couldn't tell if she knew I was there. She sat perfectly still, watching the gibbous moon rise to make its slow arc over the city.

I was several feet away when she spoke.

"I don't want to be a monster," she said quietly. She was entranced by the moon. Moonstruck. The scars on her face became veins of silver under its cold, indifferent light.

"I wish you would look at me that way," I said, sitting next to her on the edge. It scared me, the roof. This precipice. I knew if I fell, I would take her down with me.

“I can feel it,” she said, still transfixed by the moon. I hated how jealous I was of that attention. “I feel it calling to me. It sings in my blood.”

“I know,” I said, flicking a piece of gravel onto the street below. “I can put in a few extra shifts. It’s too late for this month, but next month we can afford Wolfsbane.”

She finally turned to me, a sad smile on her face. She was tired, the shadows under her eyes deeper, bright red strands of hair slipping out of her messy bun. She was wearing my favorite sweater, the one with the bee on it that I got when we were in grade twelve. She was absolutely beautiful.

She reached for me, her fingers twisting through my hair as she pulled me close.

“I don’t need Wolfsbane,” she breathed against my lips. “I just need you.”

The door to Harry’s dormitory was kicked open, and Harry hastily shoved the book under his pillow.

“We’re back!” Adrian announced, throwing himself on his bed. “Miss us, Haz?”

“My opinion is changing as we speak,” Harry said, his heart racing, smiling as Cassius and Terence entered their dorm.

“How was your holiday?” Cassius asked, looking around the room. Probably more of his furniture divination.

Harry thought back on the two weeks. Not a whole lot had happened. He played gobstones with Derek, Luna broke into the common room, Monty’s Firebolt was confiscated, he made some headway on his Benjy project, someone had sent his dad pears, Percy had sent him...

He shrugged. “It was alright.”

Subtle Suggestions

Chapter Summary

January 1994

Chapter Notes

Check out this [fanart](#) by Dax!

Severus watched his torturers swarm the Great Hall. How many days until Easter holiday? It was Harry's O.W.L. year, otherwise he'd ask the boy if he'd like to go back to Cokeworth.

"Happy New Year, Severus," Burbage said, plopping down next to him. "How was your holiday?"

"The same as every other," he said, scanning the students. Who had brewed the Amortentia? He had not seen any signs of its influence last term. He doubted he was mistaken, given the ingredients stolen.

He spotted the Diggory boy. He never thought he would loathe a student so much as James Potter's son, but hating Monty Potter hadn't been an option for quite some time. Diggory, however, had harmed his son.

"Did you like the pears?" Burbage asked hopefully.

Severus turned to look at her. He made the dispassionate observation that she could be described as *pretty*.

"They are very good," he said. "I appreciate the gesture."

Burbage smiled at him. Severus looked away.

"How was your holiday?" he asked.

"Oh, fantastic," Burbage said. "You've never really experienced Christmas until you're elbow deep in an ewe's—"

"Good evening, Severus, Charity," Lupin said quietly, sitting on Burbage's other side. "It's nice to see you two again."

“Good evening, Remus,” Burbage said, smiling at him instead. “You’re looking better.”

“Thank you,” Lupin said.

Severus scowled, and went back to imagining what horrors he would unleash if Diggory dared put his filthy hands on his son again.

“You’re supposed to sit with your own house during feasts,” Hermione said pointedly.

Luna ignored her, busy sketching in the journal Monty had got her for Christmas. He hadn’t known how nice giving someone a present they really liked would be. Luna had already decorated the covers with a collage of plants and insects, some of which were still moving. Ron gagged as one hairy spider twitched its legs.

“I don’t think anyone cares, Hermione,” Monty said as Percy walked by without comment.

“Could she at least put that away?” Ron asked. He looked like he was going to be sick.

If Monty didn’t get Ron’s hatred of the color maroon, he *really* didn’t get his fear of spiders. It was so severe Ron’s boggart was a spider. Then again, his cupboard had been chock full of spiders, so maybe he was desensitized. Monty didn’t know how many hours he had spent watching them, jealous of their ability to escape through the cracks.

Monty doubted Ron had ever seen a spider kill one of his best friends.

“Just don’t look,” he suggested, turning to face the head table as the headmaster stood.

“Easy for you to say,” Ron muttered, putting his back to Luna.

Monty sighed. He didn’t know if he could make all of his friends be friends. Hermione thought Luna was weird, and always talked over her when Luna mentioned the various creatures her and her dad searched for. He’d heard Ron call her Loony a few times, like some of Luna’s housemates did.

Monty didn’t understand. His own family thought he was a *freak* simply for having magic. From what he’d learned in Muggle Studies, witches and wizards had a very hard time fitting in with muggles. They were often seen as eccentric. Luna seemed like a normal kid to him. Why did people think she was so odd?

He’d seen Percy sit at the Ravenclaw table a few times. Maybe he could sit with Luna there? But that was right next to the Slytherin table, and he’d want to talk to Harry too.

He sighed again as the headmaster began his speech.

I pushed open the back door and let it slam shut behind me. I stumbled to the side and leaned against the wall, my back and legs killing me at the tail end of another double shift. Looking down, I saw I'd forgotten to take off my apron.

"God damnit," I muttered, fishing around the pocket for cigarettes and a lighter. Above me towered the sign announcing the diner's presence, an arrow helpfully pointing right at the building. Beneath it flashed the words WE NEVER CLOSE.

I finally unearthed the pack, buried under crumpled receipts and loose change, and pulled a smoke out with my teeth. I only had fifteen minutes, then another three hours until dawn.

The lighter wouldn't cooperate. I kept flicking and flicking that stupid, flimsy little wheel, its rough edge digging into my thumb. I barely felt it. I just needed this one thing to work out for me, and it wouldn't. It fucking wouldn't.

"Can I bum one off you?" someone asked.

"Fuck off," I mumbled, not caring if it was a customer or not. What were they going to do?

"Don't be like that, Candy."

I scowled and tugged the name tag off. I hated the thing. I hated the way they said my name.

"Do you need a light?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, then looked at whoever had interrupted one of my precious few breaks.

It was her.

"Surprised?" Sarah asked, smiling as she neared. She stopped in front of me, digging around her leather jacket and pulling out her chrome Zippo.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, lowering the cigarette and glancing at the overcast sky. "You should be asleep. You know what tomorrow is."

She shrugged, snapping open the cap of her lighter. "It's hard to sleep without you. Let me get that."

I nodded and placed the smoke back between my lips, watching as the flame blossomed in Sarah's hands. She leaned in close. I was rooted to the ground. She was the only thing I could see.

"Cadence," she said, sounding amused. The fire danced in her warm, amber eyes. "You have to breathe."

“Lupin’s looking better,” Terence observed.

Harry sighed and closed his book again. What was the point in charming the cover if he couldn’t read it in class?

“I hope the curse doesn’t hurt him,” Phoebe said wistfully. “Lockhart was handsome, but Professor Lupin’s got a certain *je ne sais quoi*. A rugged charm.”

“I think *tu sais quoi*,” Harry said flatly. “Also, he’s a professor. He’s old enough to have fathered one of us.”

“A silver fox,” Phoebe said.

“No.”

“Good afternoon, everyone,” Lupin said, turning around to address them. Harry desperately hoped he hadn’t heard Phoebe. “I hope you enjoyed your holiday. For our first lesson of the term, we will be discussing the grim. I know to many of you this creature may be considered a myth, but I regret to inform you they are quite real. If you are taking Divination, a vision of a grim may be interpreted as an omen of death. There is no evidence that actually seeing a grim results in death, but as grims are drawn to those close to death, the two events are often inversely correlated.”

Lupin lifted his wand, and a large image of a shaggy black dog appeared on the board.

“Now, grims often take the form of black dogs. However, they are shapeshifters. There have been reports of pigs, sheep, goats, and so on, usually a reflection of the grim’s environment. Can anyone tell me how a grim may be identified despite these various guises? Fred?”

Harry looked over at Fred and George Weasley. He needed to follow up with them. The twins were both looking straight ahead, unusually attentive.

He watched the twins for a moment longer before turning away. Maybe he could talk to a certain Head Boy about his unmanageable brothers.

“Professor Snape and Professor Lupin are both unavailable tonight,” Professor Flitwick said, addressing them from a platform he had conjured, “so the headmaster has asked me to supervise your Defense revision. As it is my speciality, I thought we could begin with some dueling! Now, let’s pair up. And not with your friends, you are already familiar with their styles!”

Percy noticed Professor Flitwick was addressing the Slytherins. He knew, through Harry, that the Slytherin prefects did additional Defense practice with the lower years. He’d been trying to do the same in Gryffindor, but it hadn’t generated as much interest as he had hoped. Neville Longbottom was, surprisingly, the most involved.

“Would you like to be my partner?” a quiet, aching familiar voice asked.

Percy willed himself not to blush as he turned to face Harry.

“Of course,” Percy said evenly.

“I hope you’re a better duelist than your brother,” Harry said with a half-smile.

Percy pushed up his glasses, recalling how easily Harry had beaten George. “I can assure you I am.”

Harry’s smile widened as Flitwick called them to take twenty paces.

“Excellent!” Flitwick said. “Now, in a formal duel a challenge would be issued and accepted. A date and location would be chosen, and the terms of the duel set, such as limits on which spells are used. I hope it is obvious to you all that during our exercise you will not seek to seriously harm your opponent, only disarm or in the alternative disable. Should you encounter any intruders in the castle, those limits do not apply. Do what you must to prevail.”

Percy nodded, not taking his eyes off Harry, who in turn was watching him expectantly. It had been a fairly typical start of term, settling back into the routine of school. He’d had ample time to think since his embarrassing ordeal with Auntie Muriel.

Auntie Muriel, who didn’t care what people thought of her, and had the social and financial standing for it not to matter. Harry had neither, and yet to all appearances he lived how he saw fit.

Having his elderly aunt witness him all but bow and scrape for Penelope and her parents had been more of an eye-opener than his wanton use of love potions. The behavior had obviously been appalling to her. He couldn’t bear to imagine what Harry would think, seeing him like that.

“He’s an orphan, so of course he’s not had anyone to teach him comportment and self-respect.”

Percy clenched his teeth at the memory of Penelope’s words at the beginning of the school year. How he had sat there and let her insult Harry. There were trophies with Harry’s name on them. What did Penelope have to show for her time at Hogwarts?

What did he?

Percy narrowed his eyes as Flitwick called for them to bow. Despite his small stature, Harry seemed to stand taller than them all, confident in his ability.

“Begin!” Flitwick cried.

“*Dasaðr*,” Harry said, vanishing from sight. Percy was stunned for a moment, having never heard the spell before. He had the sneaking suspicion that Harry had only spoken it aloud for his benefit. He was far too skilled for his age; Harry had all but admitted he practiced magic during summer holiday.

He had to stay focused.

Invisibility, or something similar.

“Lolligoluito.”

Thousands of droplets of ink splattered around Harry’s location, some bouncing off where Harry had clearly shielded.

“Encaustebulio,” he followed up, watching the ink form a dark bubble around where Harry should have been.

“Clever,” he heard Harry say. *“Abspilde.”*

A cleaning charm? The ink vanished as if soaked up by some massive, invisible sponge. Percy saw Harry standing there, not a hair out of place, whatever charm he had used to conceal himself gone.

“Accio Percy’s glasses,” Harry said with a grin.

“Depulso!” Percy snapped, grabbing his glasses out of the air. “Dirty tricks? *Lamobrum!*” The ground beneath Harry’s feet cracked, melted, began bubbling and growing marsh grasses.

“Duro!” Harry said, solidifying it before it could get further. *“Lyftum incinerem!”*

Harry was transfiguring *air*. That wasn’t...that was far beyond what they even learned at N.E.W.T. level. It was mad.

“Aeratio!” Percy incanted, just before he was entombed in volcanic ash.

Percy lost track of time as they exchanged spells. Harry wasn’t even bothering with anything they’d learn in Defense, it would have been too predictable for him. Percy had no idea what Harry’s repertoire was. He’d been avoiding him for months. It was all Percy could do to keep up.

Air transfigured into ash, the ash blown away in a violent gust, only to solidify into smoke-grey serpents, turned to ropes, the stone floor into water, into ice. There was no point in disarming him, not after he’d wandlessly summoned fire and retrieved his wand with a casual flick of his wrist. A Cheering Charm so strong he had to lock his own tongue to not laugh hysterically, a blinding *lumos* that made his own eyes water, sticking Harry’s feet to the ground, a shield that reflected his, streams of water and fire crashing together, a flock of birds slamming into a Sleeping Charm and landing in a feathery pile, a Confundus cast at his own wand that made the cushioning charm he attempted grow visible, undulating spikes.

Percy didn’t know when magic became rote to him, a means to an end. He was a wizard, therefore he did magic. He moved in a straight line, hit checkpoints, ticked off his progress. Simple binary operations. Harry was forcing him to think laterally, to think further and further ahead.

He couldn't remember a time when magic had been so fun. He couldn't wait to see what Harry created.

They stood facing each other, not recalling who was meant to make the next move. Harry's dark eyes were alight with mischief and unbridled joy, his magic crackling eagerly around him, almost visible in the pressure it exerted on the world. Percy couldn't recall ever feeling so alive. And Harry was smiling at him. At *him*.

The spell broke when the clapping began. Percy felt himself go red, but Harry remained annoyingly collected. He recalled the books Harry had asked him to retrieve from the Restricted Section.

"I only want to learn more about occlumency. I have no interest in invading someone's mind. Most of them are probably boring."

How far had Harry gone down that path?

"Well done Mr. Evans, Mr. Weasley!" Flitwick exclaimed, hurrying over. "I've never seen such inventive dueling from students in years!"

Percy had to tear his eyes away from Harry. "Thank you, professor."

"That was amazing, Percy!" Penelope gushed, grabbing his arm. He looked over at Harry again, but Harry was surrounded by his fellow Slytherin prefects, his friend Rookwood shaking him excitedly. Cedric Diggory hovered nearby, a disgustingly earnest expression on his face. Why had Harry stopped dating him?

"You were meeting with his father."

"His father, who I can't stand. Cedric's a more attractive version of his father. It's appalling."

Percy held back a grimace, turned to smile at Penelope, the seventh years sans Farley and McDowell, the other Gryffindor prefects. Everything felt so much *more*, almost too much. His skin buzzed, voices were shrill and grating, the lights too bright.

Suddenly, the small crowd parted, and Harry was walking towards him. Even with Penelope all but hanging off of him, Percy could not take his eyes off Harry.

"That was fun," Harry said, putting his hand out. It took Percy a moment to realize what he wanted, and his heart began to race. The last time Harry had taken his hand forced its way into his thoughts. Percy reached out and shook Harry's hand, trying not to think about the calluses on his fingertips, or how warm and firm his grip was. Self-assured. His eyes shone like distant stars in the deepest parts of space.

"We should do it again sometime," Harry said.

There was only one thing Percy could say.

"Any time."

Harry passed by the statue of Gunhilda of Gorsemoor again. According to Monty and the map, the passage hidden in her hump went straight to Honeydukes. Monty and Luna had got in and out easily enough, but Monty had his invisibility cloak. Fred and George had been able to do it too, though. Still, it was hard to imagine Sirius Black, in any disguise, walking through Hogsmeade, entering a sweetshop, and going into their cellar with no one noticing. Not to mention crawling in and out of the crone's hump, which Monty said he could barely fit through.

He opened his copy of *Death Omens*. Lupin had assigned an essay on black dogs. It had been a while since Harry had read the book, and he needed to brush up.

What should you do if you see a grim? Go to the nearest hospital because you are about to die.

It didn't make for a compelling essay.

There were a number of black dogs, some grims and some not, that had gained notoriety throughout England. Besides being black dogs, their other commonality was lingering near places of death. Graveyards, barrows, places where people were executed or murdered.

Harry paged through the tales of different dogs and their exploits. Mostly they just acted like dogs, though there was one tale of a one-eyed black dog named Old Shuck with a howl that chilled the blood and a fierce demeanor. Sightings of the dog happened during thunderstorms. Harry attributed Old Shuck's behavior to being scared by the lightning and thunder.

Harry turned the page and stopped walking.

Padfoot.

Sirius, the Dog Star. Sirius Black.

A black dog named Padfoot.

He had to get back into Filch's office.

Someone touched his back and he spun around, wand drawn. He cursed himself for getting distracted.

"Whoa, didn't mean to scare you," Cedric said, holding up his hands.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked, slowly lowering his wand.

"I didn't get a chance to talk to you after the meeting on Friday," Cedric said, taking a step closer. "You were brilliant."

“Thanks,” Harry said, stepping back.

“Seriously, I didn’t know you were that good at transfiguration,” Cedric said, chuckling. “You were keeping up with Weasley, and he’s Head Boy!”

“It wasn’t just transfiguration,” Harry said. “But thank you.”

“I kind of feel you didn’t really need my help doing your essays,” Cedric said. “I don’t think we’ve even covered most of those things.”

Harry bit back his reaction. He’d been reckless while dueling Percy, but he couldn’t give him a poor showing. It was Percy. There was no chance of Harry flying under the radar, that ship had sailed ages ago, but he hadn’t intended to reveal quite so much about himself.

Transfiguring air, had he lost his mind? Though it seemed Cedric hadn’t fully comprehended what he had seen. And shouldn’t he have been focused on his own duel?

Cedric showing up unannounced did present one opportunity. A question had been bothering Harry since Christmas, and he hadn’t known how to approach Cedric about it.

“You didn’t send me anything for Christmas, did you?” he asked

Cedric frowned in confusion, moving closer again. “No. Did you want me to? Dad says since we’re taking a break that I shouldn’t.”

Harry stared at him. “We’re not ‘taking a break,’ we’re broken up, Cedric.”

Cedric, if anything, looked more confused. “I thought it was just until after O.W.L.s?”

Harry was almost tempted to Obliviate Cedric again. Or maybe Confund him and plant some false memories. It would be easier than having a conversation.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, feeling anything but. “I don’t know what gave you that impression. You should go back to your common room. It’s past curfew, and you don’t even have rounds tonight.”

“Right,” Cedric said. “Listen, Harry, could we talk about this? I really like you, and…”

Harry shook his head. “There’s nothing to talk about. We can still be friends,” he said reluctantly, “but that’s it.”

“Because of school?” Cedric asked.

Harry closed his eyes. “Among other things. Please, just accept that it’s over so we can both move on. No hard feelings?”

Cedric sighed. “If that’s what you want.”

Harry watched Cedric walk off, just to make sure he was actually gone, then leaned against a wall. The statue of the one-eyed witch looked like she was cackling at him. He wished Sirius Black had taken the opportunity to burst through. It would have saved him a lot of trouble.

Percy had little memory of what happened during the rest of the prefects' lesson with Flitwick. Harry had approached him after they were dismissed, asking if he could be given rounds on the fourth and seventh floors. Percy had no idea why, hadn't been mindful enough to ask, and was willing to give Harry anything he wanted.

Merlin, what had Penelope thought? Percy had almost forgotten she was there too. He doubted she'd fly around on a doily in protest at the Ministry's protectionism.

The image almost made him laugh.

Oliver was out pushing the quidditch team too far, no doubt doubling his effort to match Urquhart's insane schedule, and their other dormmates were in the common room. Percy was alone, sitting at his desk and composing a letter.

He tapped ink from his quill. Occlumency. He had read the book before handing it to Harry, so he was familiar with the concept. Most people didn't even know what it was, and it made him wonder how Harry had learned of it.

It was, at its core, mental discipline.

Why hadn't he started teaching himself sooner?

Exasperated, Percy turned his attention to the letter.

Dear Auntie Muriel...

Wolfskins

Chapter Summary

January 1994

Harry could barely pay attention to the match, even though it was Slytherin playing. Astrid had lamented only having two weeks to practice before their match against Ravenclaw, but they were doing fine. More than fine.

Phoebe exuberantly cheered next to him, waving the occamy banner she had finally cajoled—or bribed—Jasmine into making. Astrid made another save, throwing the quaffle at Adrian as he shot past.

Padfoot. The name was too big a coincidence. Harry hadn't been able to get into Filch's office since start of term. Both Filch and Mrs. Norris were more vigilant with school back in session. Harry couldn't be up all night every night, he'd be dead on his feet. He didn't need much time, though. If his theory was correct, he could narrow down the years to look through.

The game was already a few hours in, and Harry could tell Astrid was intentionally dragging it out. She wanted a big lead on Ravenclaw so they'd stay ahead of Gryffindor. Harry opened his book, trusting Jasmine and Phoebe to let him know if something interesting happened.

"Mom wants me to move back to rez," Sarah whispered between kisses. "Says there's more room for me to run around."

I hummed, tracing my fingers along her side, following those tender scars. She gasped and arched her back, watching me from under hooded eyes.

"She doesn't get it," she said. "I can't allow myself to lose control like that."

I tugged her hair out of its bun, her ruby tresses spilling like blood across our rumpled sheets. Her roots were growing out. It only made her more beautiful to me.

"I wouldn't let anything happen," I whispered against her skin. "I won't."

"You can't promise something like that."

I ran my hand between her breasts, felt the delicate flutter of her heart.

"Watch me."

“Foul! Foul!” Lee Jordan shouted from the commentator’s stand. Phoebe shrieked and started shaking Harry.

“What happened?” Harry asked, looking around the pitch. He spotted it immediately when Ravenclaw called a time out. Cho Chang was doubled over, clutching her side.

“She got hit with a bludger,” Jasmine said. “Too busy trying to distract Terence.”

“That’s not a foul,” Harry said, watching the Slytherin team land. Both beaters, Lucian and Peregrine, were looking pleased with themselves. Astrid was gestuculating wildly, while Terence was shaking his head.

“I think she’s going to wrap things up now,” Harry said. “Ravenclaw will be desperate with Chang injured. She probably broke a few ribs.”

“It was only a matter of time,” Jasmine said. “Everyone knew Chang would get injured playing the way she does. She’s too focused on the opposing seeker, and it’s like that *every* game. If she hadn’t been watching Terence, she would have seen that bludger.”

“What are you reading?” Phoebe asked suddenly, trying to snatch his book away.

“Keep your hands to yourself,” Harry said, quickly hiding the book in his robes. “It’s literature. High literature.”

“Right,” Jasmine said doubtfully. “And I read *Witch Weekly* for the articles.”

“Exactly,” he said. “Oh, look, the game’s starting again.”

Percy didn’t join Penelope at the Ravenclaw table. They were licking their wounds, commiserating over their staggering loss against Slytherin. Instead, he finished his breakfast and left the Great Hall for the library.

There were rumors around the common room about Monty having got a Firebolt for Christmas, started by Ron it seemed. Oliver had been talking about it nonstop, going to McGonagall to petition its return. The broom had caused some sort of rift between his brother and Hermione, with Monty caught in the middle. Everyone was convinced the Firebolt was their key to getting the Quidditch Cup. Percy didn’t think Monty needed any more advantages in that regard, given how much praise he got for his flying skills using another high-end broom. With Cho Chang injured, and the Ravensclaws reeling from their loss, there was little cause for concern how the next game would go.

He would be glad to leave all the quidditch nonsense behind. Percy cared for it insofar as it impacted their getting the House Cup, which would in turn reflect on him as Head Boy.

Being Head Boy and studying for N.E.W.T.s were good excuses for absenting himself from the incessant quidditch talk.

The library was not the preferred weekend haunt for most students, and Percy was unsurprised to see it largely empty so early in the morning. He exchanged greetings with Madam Pince and walked towards the Restricted Section. He had a tentative plan for explaining his presence there: his father's latest foray into politics. It had been in the *Daily Prophet* that morning, a succinct announcement of the proposed changes to the Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects.

Percy walked slowly through the stacks, his eyes skipping over titles. He'd seen Harry leave the Great Hall after having breakfast with the Slytherin first-years, plus Luna Lovegood who vacillated between the Gryffindor and Slytherin tables, only occasionally being convinced to eat with her fellow Ravenclaws. Percy wondered if anyone else noticed how the girl avoided Hufflepuff entirely.

It didn't take him long to find Harry. He was sitting at the table Percy thought of as Harry's, only this time he wasn't surrounded by books, or frowning over roll after roll of parchment covered in arithmantic equations in his own careful script. He was leaning back in his chair with his legs propped up on the table, reading a book. His kitten, the ridiculously named Lady Madeleine, was sleeping in his lap.

Percy silently watched him, captivated, unwilling to disrupt the moment. Then, realizing what he was doing, he cleared his throat.

The book snapped shut. "Good morning, Percy," Harry said, taking his legs off the table.

"Good morning," he replied, not knowing what name to call Harry. "What are you reading?"

"A book," Harry said, a light flush on his cheeks.

Percy was momentarily speechless. Harry had only said the word *book*. How could it possibly be so...

He pushed up his glasses. "What is it called?"

Harry wrinkled his nose, then looked at the book in his hands. "It's called *Wolfskins: A Prairie Romance*. It's about these two women, a muggle and a werewolf. Adrian gave it to me for Christmas. If he knew I was reading it I wouldn't hear the end of it."

Harry was reading a romance novel?

"It sounds interesting," Percy said. "You have very diverse taste in literature."

Harry laughed lightly. "I suppose you could say that. I'm pretty sure Adrian only got it because it has two girls, you know? But it's nice to know there are other people like me in the magical world, and that they're willing to write about it."

Harry paused, then hesitantly asked, "It doesn't bother you, does it?"

Percy was still standing, not having wanted to invite himself to sit at Harry's table. He wished he had. His legs had gone weak.

The question threw him. Why did Harry care what he thought? He couldn't possibly still... not after having witnessed that scene in the dungeons. Percy knew how much he had hurt Harry. He'd hurt him, and for what? The two years between them felt insurmountable. Not to mention their both being... And even after that, Harry had still wanted to talk to him. Still wanted to be friends. Still sent the most thoughtful gifts he had ever received. Still...

Harry was waiting for him to answer, his expression growing more closed off. Percy realized, as his brother Charlie would have put it, that he was fucking up.

"It doesn't," he said firmly.

Harry relaxed, plainly relieved. "I'm glad. I was... I know some pureblood families don't exactly approve of homosexuality. Cedric's dad definitely doesn't."

Percy cleared his throat, and finally worked up the nerve to sit down across from Harry. He was a Gryffindor. He was a Weasley. He was a Prewett. He wasn't a coward.

"Amos Diggory is a fool," he said, earning a startled laugh from Harry. "He clings to the dubious prestige of having had a Minister for Magic in the family over a century ago. Don't allow yourself to be influenced by such a man."

Harry smiled warmly at him. "I won't. So, what are you doing back here?"

Percy had his answer for this. He had come prepared. "I'm not sure if you are aware—" a small lie, he was certain Harry was aware "—but there have been some proposed changes to the Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects. Namely, flying carpets."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "That's your dad's thing."

He nodded. "I was hoping you would perhaps like to have a discussion about it?"

Harry smiled at him, tucking his novel into his robes. "I would love to."

After delivering the latest goblet of Wolfsbane, Harry sat in Lupin's office reading his book while he waited for his professor to finish. Lady Madeleine was aggressively kneading his stomach.

I woke up to the sound of the phone ringing. Groaning, I felt around for my glasses, knocking them to the floor.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I mumbled, grabbing the clock and squinting at it. “It’s the middle of the night.”

I looked over to check if Sarah was still asleep, and realized with dawning horror that she had never come home. I stumbled out of our bedroom, racing to grab the phone off the hook.

“Hello?” I said desperately, hoping the worst hadn’t happened. An accident?

“Cadence,” Sarah drawled, sounding pleased with herself. “Candy...finally! You took forever to answer.”

“Where are you?” I asked, gripping the phone so tightly the plastic squealed. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sarah mumbled. I could hear people laughing and shouting behind her, the sound of cars driving past, their chains crunching through the snow. “I was just at Andrew’s going away party,” she slurred. “Did you know he’s moving to Toronto? He’s going to be an accountant or some shit.”

I took a deep breath. I couldn’t believe she was doing this again. “Are you drunk?”

“What? No,” Sarah said, sounding marginally more sober. “I’m good. I’m great. How are you?”

“Where are you?” I asked. I wanted to start getting dressed, but the phone cord wasn’t long enough. I was tethered to it.

“Don’t know,” Sarah said, her voice moving away from the receiver. “Near the bar?”

“Can you ask someone where you are?” I prompted. “The cross streets?”

“I tried to call a cab,” she said. “Forgot the number.” She burped, then giggled.

Drunk. Again. What could I say to that? I knew it had been a rough moon for her. I saw the new scars on her leg, trying to bite her way out of the chains. Someone had called the cops, so I’d had to deal with that too, making excuses about a senile old dog, saying anything to get them to leave.

I knew Sarah was magic. A witch. She’d told me everything about not being allowed to go to school with the other witches after she had been bit. About her wand being snapped. Maybe it was time to reach out to her old school friends. We couldn’t afford to move again. I doubted we’d get back the deposit.

“Hello?” a new voice said.

“Hi,” I said as nicely as I could, grateful to speak with someone lucid. “My girlfriend’s drunk. Can you tell me where she is so I can come get her?”

“Yeah, of course,” the person said. “We’re at...”

I closed my eyes, memorizing the cross streets. The buses had already stopped running. Sarah would probably fall off the back of my bike. So that meant walking, or finding a cab.

I had an opening shift in a few hours. I was already tired. And now she was doing this to me.

Again.

I thanked the stranger and hung up, the sound of Sarah's drunken laughter ringing in my ears.

"Is that the book you've been reading in class?"

Harry flinched, embarrassed at being caught. "It is, sir. Sorry, I'll stop doing it."

Lupin waved his apology away. "I know you're ahead of the material, and that you're following along. As long as it doesn't interfere with your studies..."

"It doesn't," Harry said, putting the book away. "It's really interesting. I don't think I've read any books with a werewolf protagonist, except *Hairy Snout, Human Heart*."

Lupin grimaced. "I'm not fond of stories that romanticize lycanthropy."

Harry wasn't sure how to respond. Lupin was actually a werewolf, wouldn't his opinion be more valid? "I'm not sure if I'd call it *romanticizing*, sir. I think it humanizes them more than anything. It shows that they're still people, still have to live their lives."

"Perhaps," Lupin said, a little sadly. Did he not think of himself as human? As a *person*?

"What's it called? Maybe I'll give it a look."

Harry *really* didn't know what to say to that.

Severus was experiencing a rare feeling. Apprehension. One might even call it nervousness. He distracted himself with his nascent plot to eradicate dementors.

There were a few hurdles in his path to ridding the world of their vile presence. Their apparent immortality was only a minor issue, as far as Severus was concerned. The Patronus Charm was the only known defense, driving them away. What if they were driven into the Mariana Trench? Or past the stratosphere? How would a dementor enjoy orbiting the sun?

No, Severus' main concern was the Dark Lord's interest in dementors. To remove them would remove the advantage gained from allying with such creatures. And they *would* ally with the Dark Lord. He could offer the dementors more nourishing fare than emaciated prisoners.

The knock at his office door caught him off guard. "Enter."

The door opened on silent hinges, revealing Harry. Severus relaxed slightly. It was only Harry, returning the silver goblet used for Lupin's Wolfsbane.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked, setting the goblet on his desk.

"I am fine," he said.

Harry raised an eyebrow. His kitten stuck her head out of Harry's robes and meowed.

"The affairs of your elders are of no concern to you," he tried.

"Right," Harry said blandly. "Grown-up stuff."

Before he could retort, there was another knock. Harry looked between him and the door, a smile growing on his face.

"Come in," Severus said, ignoring Harry's expression. Maybe scrubbing some cauldrons would wipe the cheeky grin off his face.

"You wanted to see me?" Burbage asked, looking around the room. She spotted Harry. "Oh, sorry! Didn't realize you were meeting with a student."

"Mr. Evans was just leaving," Severus said, giving Harry a significant look. Harry just smiled wider.

"Thank you for explaining the difference between Confusing and Befuddlement Draughts," Harry said sincerely. Severus would have rolled his eyes any other time. His son was getting better at acting. "Have a nice evening, Professor Snape, Professor Burbage."

Harry swept out of the room, his robes billowing slightly. Severus hadn't been able to pull that off at his age. Shaking his head, he looked at Burbage, who had an idiotic smile on her face.

"You know, students are always complaining about what a hardass you are," she said, taking the seat across from him. "It sounds like you're pretty good at this teaching thing."

"If, after over a decade, I was not at least passably competent, I could not justify my salary," he said. "Meager as it is."

Burbage laughed, looking around his office. Had he cleaned recently? "So, I've been summoned to a secret, subterranean meeting. Am I being initiated into a cult or ritually sacrificed?"

"Neither," Severus said in his best unimpressed tone. "I have been working with the headmaster on a project which is to be kept from the rest of the staff."

"Oh?" Burbage said. "Is that why you and Lupin are always holed up in his office?"

“Indeed,” Severus said. “I believe we have reached an impasse in our research.”

“Why talk to me about it?” she asked.

Severus looked into her vibrant grey eyes. He had never been given to insipid sayings, such as *the eyes are the window to the soul*. Burbage would probably say, *To thee I do commend my watchful soul, ere I let fall the windows of mine eyes*. The eyes were, if anything, a window to the mind.

“I believe you would be suited to assisting me in a matter of arithmancy,” he said solemnly.

“You need help with your maths?” Burbage asked, grinning at him.

Severus closed his eyes. Why had he wanted this hare-brained woman’s help again?

“Yes,” he said, deciding it would be prudent to speak in her vernacular. If only for the sake of preserving his soundness of mind. “I need help with maths.”

Burbage hummed to herself, kicking her legs like a restless child. “Okay. But I’ve got two conditions.”

Severus was beyond the point of second guessing himself. “What are your conditions?”

“Well, you’ve got to ask nicely,” she said. “And you’ve got to start calling me Charity. I’m getting sick of all this *Burbage* business.”

Severus stared at her. She smiled inanely back.

“Fine,” he ultimately decided. “Could you *please* help me with my maths, Charity?”

Burbage started laughing. Severus waited for her to regain control of herself. He wasn’t humiliated. Not at all. He had crawled at the Dark Lord’s feet. He could ask his colleague for assistance.

After some time, Burbage—Charity—settled down.

“Sure thing,” Charity said, smiling kindly. Her dimples made her smile seem even warmer. “I’ll help you, Severus.”

Lady Madeleine gave a kittenish growl that rumbled through her tiny chest. She was already six months old, and Harry wasn’t sure he’d be able to carry her around in his pockets much longer. Magically expanded pockets weren’t exactly safe for living things.

“I know,” he whispered, scanning the entrance hall.

It was the full moon. Lupin was in his office, sleeping off his Wolfsbane and violent transformation. He knew his dad kept an eye on the second floor, and had conscripted both Filch and Mrs. Norris to make sure Lupin didn't escape and attack anyone. Harry had no idea what Filch would do against an adult werewolf, other than get mauled. Lady Madeleine would do better, mostly because she could run faster than an old man.

Even with Lupin to distract them, and the rest of the castle on alert lest Sirius Black make another appearance, Harry was still taking a big risk breaking into Filch's office again. But he had to know.

Leaving Lady Madeleine to keep watch, Harry hurried down the corridors to Filch's office, slipping in with practiced ease. Sirius Black had been in the same year as his dad. As his mum. It was harder thinking of Sirius Black in that context, as being in the same year and house as his mum. His mum, who may have died due to his actions.

He couldn't get distracted. Harry swiftly located boxes one thousand and forty to one thousand and fifty-six. He pulled off a lid, quickly scanning the cards.

James Potter and Sirius Black. Apprehended using an illegal hex upon Bertram Aubrey. Aubrey's head twice normal size. Double detention.

Harry winced. That sort of thing could easily kill someone.

Ronan Mulciber. Apprehended attempting an illegal curse upon Mary Macdonald. Macdonald's school robes destroyed. Two weeks detention.

Harry kept reading through cards, disturbed to see the sort of things students were doing to each other during the Dark Lord's rise to power. He was upset at seeing his own dad's name more than a few times, but he was under no illusions as to what his dad had been like. James Potter and Sirius Black came up frequently, sometimes with Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew. Box after box. How had Remus Lupin been made a prefect? Was he the best of four bad options? And how had James Potter been made Head Boy?

Time moved by quickly as Harry flipped through cards, offenses ranging from petty to attempted murder. He was worried he would have to wait until the next full moon when he finally found it.

Peter Pettigrew. Apprehended after curfew examining suspicious parchment. Parchment confiscated, appears blank. Suspected highly dangerous. Detention.

Harry stared at the card. Peter Pettigrew. Friends with Sirius Black, James Potter, and Remus Lupin.

Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs.

Three guesses who *Moony* was.

Harry put the card away before he destroyed it.

If Professor Lupin was Moony, then he knew about the secret passages. He had helped map them.

He had to get out of Filch's office.

Harry took out his wand, returning the boxes to their rightful places. He cast a few more spells to erase his presence. He needed to make sure Mrs. Norris didn't smell anything. She would lead Filch right to him.

If Professor Lupin was Moony...

Padfoot. What other reason could there be for such a moniker? He couldn't see Monty's dad being called *Wormtail*, so he must have been Prongs.

Harry shut the office door behind him, getting his emotions under control. It wouldn't do to be caught. Disillusioning himself was second nature, and he walked silently down the corridor, crossing his arms.

Moony, the werewolf. Padfoot, possibly a dog. Very likely a dog. Wormtail, that could have referred to anything. Maybe a mouse, or a rat. Not a very flattering nickname for a friend. Then Prongs.

If Professor Lupin was Moony, then he knew about the secret passages. If Sirius Black was an animagus, then Professor Lupin knew that too.

Harry had checked the Animagus Registry. There were only seven people on it. Professor McGonagall, a tabby cat. Others Harry couldn't remember at the moment. Someone was a gerbil, he'd got a laugh out of that. Sirius Black? Definitely not.

That at least one teenager had managed the transformation was remarkable. Almost as remarkable as Professor Remus 'Jackass' Lupin keeping that information secret when his little brother's life was at stake. Their entire world viewed Sirius Black as a deranged, mass murdering servant of Voldemort. Harry had his reservations, but that didn't prevent him from exerting caution. Even if Sirius Black was innocent, what had twelve years in Azkaban done to him?

Lady Madeleine meowed in surprise when he picked her up and carried her into the dungeons.

Harry didn't know what to do with his theory. He held his kitten to his chest, taking comfort from her purrs. The information he had would be used to apprehend Black, possibly to kill him. If he told anyone, he could be consigning an innocent man to death.

One question kept him up late into the night, his consciousness struggling against the potion he took.

If Sirius Black was after Monty, why hadn't he attacked them in Diagon Alley?

Homo homini lupus

Chapter Summary

February 1994

Chapter Notes

Depending on your time zone, this would be the third chapter of the day hahahahahaha

Harry watched the owls fly into the Great Hall, their great morning migration, through half-lidded eyes. A week had passed and he still hadn't decided what to do with his newfound knowledge. All of the proof he had wasn't really proof, just conjecture. If Sirius Black *was* an animagus, and if Professor Lupin *had* helped create the Marauder's Map, had he already told someone? Would Harry know if he had? He imagined his dad would share the information with him, if he didn't go to the Ministry and *Daily Prophet* first.

Harry couldn't come up with a good reason for Lupin to have not told anyone. He doubted Lupin was working with Sirius Black. When would they have had time to concoct a plan, with Black in Azkaban and Lupin who knew where? And Lupin saw Monty on a regular basis. If he wanted to hurt Monty, it would be incredibly easy.

He yawned and caught his *Daily Prophet* out of the air, narrowly saving it from an untimely demise in Terence's cornflakes. When he opened it up, he was unaccountably glad for his reticence.

KISS-ON-SIGHT ORDER ISSUED

The tragic, familiar face of Sirius Black gazed blankly from the front page, unaware of his being consigned to a fate worse than death.

"It's about time," Adrian said, looking over his shoulder. "Everyone's getting sick of the Ministry pussyfooting around."

"I feel bad for any blokes who look like him," Terence said, gesturing with his spoon.

“Dementors can’t see,” Harry said, reading the article. There wasn’t any new information in it, just a repetition of Sirius Black’s alleged crimes, the break out, the Ministry’s investigation. Nothing new, except the dementors surrounding Hogwarts now had permission to deploy their most abhorrent weapon.

“For any who have a similar tasting soul then,” Terence said, returning to his food.

“Who even says *pussyfooting*,” Astrid said. “You sound ancient.”

Harry stopped paying attention to his friends’ bickering. The entire world was out to get Sirius Black. How was it he, whose mum they accused Black of betraying, was the only one to even consider there might be more to the man’s story? Maybe Black was the secret-keeper—how did everyone know?—and he’d been compelled to give the information willingly? *Tell us where the Potters are or we’ll blow up London*, or some other heinous threat? No one had any idea how or when or *why* Monty’s parents were discovered. Sirius Black screaming hysterically in the street was evidence enough.

He looked at the Gryffindor table, glad for once his brother hadn’t yet got into the habit of reading the news every day. Even his swotty friend Hermione didn’t. His eyes found, out of embarrassingly long habit, Percy. He could barely see him through all the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, but he could tell from Percy’s posture he wasn’t pleased about something.

“Staring at Weasley again?” Astrid whispered, poking him in the side.

Harry flinched away. “Was not. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Apparently Astrid hadn’t been quiet enough.

“What’s going on with you and him anyway?” Jasmine asked.

“With who and what?” Adrian asked.

“Not what, who,” Jasmine said.

“Who, who!” Luna said from the Ravenclaw table.

“Him and the Head Boy,” Jasmine said, giving Harry an innocent smile.

“Nothing,” Harry said. “I don’t know why you would think there would be anything.”

“Did something happen?” Astrid asked.

“Many things, Astrid, many things,” Cassius said. “Things that have happened, things that are happening, and things that are yet to come.”

“Shove it, Warrington,” Astrid said. “I meant between Harry and—”

Harry viciously jabbed Astrid in the side. Retribution. She scowled at him.

“Nothing,” Harry repeated. “He’s got a girlfriend.”

“You should have seen them dueling,” Jasmine said. “I can’t believe the whole school isn’t talking about it.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Harry muttered.

“What duel?” Astrid asked, turning on him. “You never told me about any duel.”

“Because it’s *nothing*,” Harry said. “Just a bit of magic in the normal course of my prefect duties.”

“There was nothing *normal* about it,” Jasmine said teasingly. “You were trying to impress him.”

“Was not,” Harry said. He hoped he wasn’t blushing. He couldn’t always control it, especially not in the heat of the moment. “I was just following Flitwick’s instructions.”

“Oh, of course,” Jasmine said. “I must have missed where he told us to wandlessly conjure balls of fire so hot the floor began to crystallize, then wordlessly summon your wand back.”

“You *what*?” Astrid exclaimed, slamming the table. Terence snatched up his bowl of cereal before it spilled. “How the fucking hell did I miss that? I should’ve been a prefect!”

“It wasn’t crystal, it was glass,” Harry said, folding up his *Daily Prophet* and standing. “And that was only because those particular stones had a high silica content. I’m afraid I must be off to the library. Good day, gents and gentesses.”

“That’s not a word,” Jasmine called out.

“I said it, therefore it is a word,” Harry called back.

“We have Ancient Runes together!” Jasmine shouted. “Don’t think this is over!”

Harry quickened his pace. His friends were the worst.

“So,” Jasmine said, sliding in next to him. Cassius sat down on her other side, nodding to Harry.

“So?” Harry asked. He had got to their Ancient Runes classroom early, having found the book he needed relatively quickly. He was interested in the animagus transformation for himself. It was very useful, and an exercise of advanced magic. He was also slightly concerned Luna might snap one day and attempt to transfigure herself into an owl.

Happily, the Restricted Section had a book on it. He wasn’t sure if Monty’s dad and his friends were ever trusted enough to be granted a pass into the Restricted Section, but with an invisibility cloak anyone could stroll in.

“You and the Head Boy,” Jasmine said in a low voice.

“Just say Weasley,” he whispered.

“But no one would know which one,” she said.

“That’s the point,” Harry hissed, watching from the corner of his eye as George Weasley strolled into the room. Harry really needed to follow up with him and Fred, but he knew he was to blame too. Wanting Monty to be safe and wanting him to be happy were in constant conflict.

“What did you two talk about after your cool, detached, bog standard duel?” Jasmine asked.

“Prefect rounds,” Harry said, relieved when Professor Babbling finally entered the room. With O.W.L.s approaching, they were getting started with runic representation of numbers. It was a topic they’d covered to some extent in arithmancy, as numbers could be represented in many ways, but they hadn’t yet integrated it with other runes. Harry had been looking forward to it all year, but the Kiss-on-Sight order scared the shit out of him.

Harry ignored the lecture and read the book he had found.

Identifying the Animagus

An animagus is distinguishable from its natural animal counterpart in several key ways...the animagus form will have unusual colorings or patterns...An animagus who wears spectacles may have a spectacle-like markings about their animal form’s eyes...scars, particularly those created by Dark magic, are typically transferred...animagi may have ‘human-like’ eyes...make note of the natural animal’s mannerisms. An animagus will often deviate from this ‘natural’ behavior...

“Mr. Evans, how is the number seven represented?”

Harry looked up and saw Professor Babbling giving him a hard stare.

“It is the Unknown Creature, professor,” he said. “Seven as a number has been considered the most magical, if there is such a thing, across many cultures for millenia. Both magical and muggle. Most frequently it is a symbol of good luck, though in some places the opposite is true. It is therefore difficult to assign it to any particular creature. Which would be the most magical? Moreover, the number seven is rarely found expressed in nature. Not many creatures have seven of anything. This adds to the mysticism surrounding the number.”

“Very good, Mr. Evans,” Professor Babbling said. “Please continue to pay attention while I am lecturing.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry said, both annoyed and ashamed at being called out. Reading ahead meant that lectures were somewhat redundant, but if he didn’t read ahead they would be too slow. If he sat there taking notes the whole time, he’d be bored out of his mind.

He waited until Professor Babbling’s back was turned, then opened his book again.

The Animagus Reversal Charm

Percy was in the common room surveying his domain, small though it was, when he noticed a commotion at the portrait hole.

Monty Potter entered the common room, the legendary Firebolt held aloft. Percy sighed, and reminded himself to petition the professors once again for structured study periods. Even if the professors had no time to monitor them, surely the prefects could?

“Where’d you get it, Monty?”

“Can I hold it?”

“Will you let me have a go?”

“Have you ridden it yet?”

“Can I just *touch* it?”

Et cetera.

Percy watched as a broom that exceeded his father’s salary was carelessly passed around the room, Monty standing awkwardly to the side as his personal possession was manhandled by dozens of hands. Ginny looked ready to faint. He could hear Ron pestering Monty to ride it.

Percy didn’t know if he could let so much as a quill of his be bandied about like that.

Eventually, the crowd dispersed, and the broom was presented to Hermione, one of the few people who hadn’t accosted Monty. She looked tired, working on three assignments simultaneously. Percy didn’t know why she hadn’t taken his advice, but Hermione was more desperate to prove herself and overachieve than most. Not that he could judge anyone for that given his own less than stellar behavior, but Hermione was barely managing her workload, and piling more on.

“I got it back,” Monty said, smiling at her.

She smiled tentatively back, until Ron said, “See? Told you there wasn’t anything wrong with it!”

“Well, there might have been,” she said, looking at Monty with a slight frown. “At least we know it’s safe now.”

“I only hope they didn’t damage it,” Monty said, looking at his broom. “You know, the spells they use on brooms are proprietary. That means that only the broommakers know what they are.”

“I know what it means,” Hermione said. “I’m sure Professor Flitwick and Madam Hooch were careful.”

“Who cares?” Ron said excitedly. “It’s a Firebolt!”

“I’d better put it upstairs,” Monty said. “I’ll just—”

“I’ll take it!” Ron said. “I’ve got to give Scabbers his tonic anyway.”

Ron grabbed the Firebolt and hurried off, leaving Monty standing there with a conflicted expression.

Percy had never understood his younger siblings' lack of regard for others. They had all grown up with the same parents, in the same house, under the same impoverished conditions. But he, Bill, and Charlie never ran off with their friend’s possessions, or complained about being poor all the time, or broke into someone’s room to read sensitive documents which they routinely quoted, or set off fireworks in someone’s trunk, or *borrowed* a quill to never return it, or showed gross disregard for their own belongings, or turned their room into a pigsty, which was frankly an insult to the pigs because they were rather intelligent and well-kempt.

He knew something about how Monty had been brought up too. Nothing directly, he didn’t want to pry, but he had heard about cupboards and Dursleys, and seen his mother charm Monty’s clothes to better fit, enough times to have a general idea that despite how much Monty had in his Gringotts vault, he hadn’t seen a knut of it until he was eleven. Yet his behavior was diametrically opposed to Ron’s.

Hermione was just explaining to Monty why Arithmancy was her favorite class when there was a blood-curdling scream from the third-year boy’s dormitory. Percy leapt up, worried his brother had been attacked. Ron ran into the common room, dragging a sheet behind him.

“Look!” Ron shouted, storming up to Hermione and shaking the sheet in her face. “Look!”

“Ron, what—”

“Scabbers! Look! *Scabbers!*”

The entire common room was deathly silent. Percy too was confused by Ron’s behavior. Had something happened to Scabbers?

“Blood!” Ron shouted. “He’s gone! And you know what was on the floor?”

Ron threw a fistful of orange cat fur at Hermione.

“Alright, that does it,” Percy said, standing and walking over. “Granger, where is your cat?”

“I...I don’t know,” Hermione said, looking from the enraged Ron to him.

Percy pinched the bridge of his nose. “How many times have I told you to get your cat under control? And now it seems he has successfully attacked—”

“Murdered!” Ron bellowed, shaking his sheets again. Percy saw there were a few drops of blood. He would have expected Scabbers to have more in him.

“Whatever occurred,” Percy said, “Scabbers is missing and Crookshanks is the most likely culprit. You two are coming with me to speak with Professor McGonagall.”

Crookshanks had fled into the night.

Percy doubted anyone would be able to find him. Kneazles were known for being crafty. The orange tom gave Mrs. Norris a run for her money. At the very least they could try to keep him out of Gryffindor Tower, but it was little late given Scabbers was missing, presumed dead.

After Hermione was given detention—not punishment enough, according to Ron, though Percy understood why taking points would have only further injured Ron—Percy had tried to talk to the deputy headmistress about Hermione’s questionable usage of her Time-Turner. McGonagall said she had it well under hand, leaving Percy with the impression that she was letting Hermione learn the hard way. Short of talking to Hermione again, who was already at her wit’s end, or perhaps stealing her Time-Turner which would only distress her further, Percy didn’t know what to do.

He poured himself a cup of coffee, deep in thought.

“Is it true?” Penelope asked, startling him. She had never lowered herself to join him at the Gryffindor table before. Why now? “I heard Potter’s got a Firebolt.”

“We’ll soon see,” Percy said as Monty entered the Great Hall, surrounded by the other boys in his dormitory.

Percy glanced at the Slytherin table. Harry was watching Monty too. He had a faint smile, while the other Slytherins ranged from furious to relieved.

Puzzling over Harry’s aberrant attitude, he turned to Penelope. It was time to earn back all the money he’d spend drugging himself for her pleasure.

“Care to make a wager?”

“Thank fuck we played them before he got that thing,” Astrid said, shaking her head. “Who in their right mind buys a kid a Firebolt?”

Harry was reasonably certain the purchaser was not in his right mind, and hadn’t been for twelve years. “He has a lot of admirers.”

“It’s obscene,” Astrid said. “I blame Malfoy.”

Harry glanced at Draco, who was gawking at the Firebolt like most everyone else in the Great Hall. He didn’t know why Monty was showing it off. Psychological warfare? He was proud of his little brother, if it was intentional. Captain Lament had taught him the value of traumatizing one’s enemy. Opponent.

“You can’t keep blaming Malfoy for every quidditch problem,” Terence said absently, staring in awe at the Firebolt.

“I think you’re drooling, dear,” Jasmine said, tossing a napkin at him.

“I don’t blame him for everything,” Astrid said. “Just the brooms.”

“Put it here, Monty!” Oliver Wood called out. Dishes clattered as Wood cleared space for the Firebolt to be laid out. Harry couldn’t see much from where he was sitting, but he didn’t need to. Monty had got him to try out the Firebolt. Not that Harry had been careening around at top speed, but he did a few laps.

It was a nice broom.

Astrid would throttle him if she knew he’d ridden a Firebolt.

“Oh, look, Diggory’s going over to look,” Astrid said, starting to stand. “Maybe I should too. As a quidditch captain.”

Harry pulled her back down. “No sabotage.”

“As if I could in front of everyone,” she muttered.

“Doesn’t look like Potter’s happy to see him,” Adrian said, frowning as he tried to look through the crowd.

“Who, Gittory?” Astrid asked.

Harry choked on his coffee. “What?”

“That’s what I call him, in my head,” Astrid said. “He’s a git, hence Gittory.”

He was distracted when he heard Percy's voice. Percy was standing next to Penelope Clearwater, who was holding the Firebolt.

"Now, now, Penny, no sabotage!" Percy said. "Penelope and I have got a bet on. Ten galleons on the outcome of the match!"

Harry looked down at his food. It was a stupid bet. Even without the Firebolt, betting against Gryffindor, against Monty, was a bad idea.

He glanced up to see Penelope walking back to the Ravenclaw table.

"Watching him again?" Astrid whispered.

Harry shook his head

"Yes, I'm coming, Penny!"

"Well, that's put me off my food," Harry muttered, looking up again to see Percy chasing after Penelope. Their eyes met for a moment, but Percy quickly looked away, sitting at the Ravenclaw table with his back facing Harry.

Harry picked up his coffee, looking at Percy over the rim of his cup. His ears had gone completely red.

He was missing his brother's game again.

Harry hadn't been guarding the pitch during the Slytherin game, given it was his house team, but he was on duty for the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw match. He was sad to miss his brother absolutely destroying Ravenclaw, but with the Kiss-on-Sight order Harry was even more concerned about the dementors.

There wasn't much to do but stand around, or sit around, listening to the shouting and cheering and Lee Jordan babbling about the Firebolt. Harry took out his book.

I stood uselessly in the middle of the room as Sarah emptied drawers and shelves, shoving all of her things into a black garbage bag.

"I'll come back for the rest," she said without looking at me.

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to do. One minute we were arguing about what to do for the full moon, the next...

"I'll send you money for next month's rent," she said, tugging her boots on.

"I don't care about that," I said. "I don't understand. Why are you doing this?"

She stopped tying her laces, staring at the ground. "Do you know what it's like to lose everything? Do you have any idea how hard it is to keep starting over? I can't...I'm going back home. I can't be with you like this."

"This is home," I said numbly.

Sarah only shook her head. She finished putting on her boots, slung the garbage bag over her shoulder, and before I could react she was gone.

She had left her keys on the kitchen counter.

I picked them up, then looked out of the window. She was walking down the street. She didn't look back.

Do you know what it's like to lose everything?

Watching her leave me, in that moment I did.

Something moved in the trees.

Harry looked up from his book, glad he was already holding his wand. Some bushes rustled, and there was a flash of orange.

Lady Madeleine stuck her head out of his robes and meowed. The rustling stopped, and Harry saw a pair of dark amber eyes.

"Crookshanks?" Harry said, getting to his feet. "You're wanted for the murder of Scabbers the Rat. Put your paws where I can see them."

Crookshanks stared at him for a long moment, then vanished back into the trees.

"So he's taken refuge in the Forbidden Forest," Harry muttered, not wanting to chase after the felonious cat. Percy had told all the prefects what happened between Crookshanks and Scabbers, the saga culminating in the disappearance and likely consumption of the poor rat. Harry was glad Lady Madeleine hadn't yet acquired a taste for other people's pets, but feared it was only a matter of time.

"Don't eat Phoebe's frog," he told her. She blinked at him, yawned, then burrowed back into his robes.

Harry was glad he had rounds that evening. He could only take so much of his friends talking about quidditch strategy. Gryffindor had easily won against Ravenclaw, retaking the lead in points. With only two games left in the year, things weren't looking good for Slytherin.

Percy had granted his request to have his rounds on the fourth and seventh floors. Knowing the Room of Requirement was right there, waiting to be explored, tested Harry's patience, but he dutifully marched back and forth, pacing the corridors until the end of his shift.

At midnight, Harry slipped into the Room of Requirement. Sorting through all of the junk was fun, but got repetitive after a while. It was such an interesting artifact of Hogwarts, and he didn't want to deprive future generations of discovering it like he had. It *did* save him money on presents, though. That was useful.

He was still trying to figure out what all the Room of Requirement was capable of. Could it produce a quidditch pitch? What about a swimming pool? If he wanted an art gallery, what would he see? What about a muggle movie theater? Would the Room provide the best form of entertainment it could?

It was also a space where Harry could practice magic, and teach his brother. He was on the fence about bringing Luna in on the secret, because he wanted something just for his brother and himself. Even if it didn't mean as much to Monty as it did to him.

After spending some time testing out the room—it did not know what a movie theater was and turned into an empty room, one of its few failures—Harry checked his watch. While it wasn't that far past midnight, it was still getting late.

"Let's go," he said to Lady Madeleine, who had found a very realistic toy mouse to play with. It gave a pathetic squeak as she batted it across the floor.

Harry opened the door, and was immediately bowled over by something large, furry, and reeking of dog.

Harry pushed himself up and slammed the door shut. He drew his wand, pointing it at the panting, cowering black dog.

He couldn't believe his eyes. He couldn't believe his luck. Never, in a million years, did he actually think he'd run into Sirius Black.

"We're on the seventh floor," Harry said, nudging Lady Madeleine behind him. She was oddly indifferent to the dog's presence.

The dog looked at him, then laid on the ground, whining.

"Don't pull that shit on me," Harry said coldly. "You tried to break into Gryffindor Tower again, didn't you?"

The dog flinched back, then began growling.

Harry wasn't going to take any chances. He'd learned a spell just for the occasion. "*Fulgari*."

Luminous cords wrapped around the dog, tightening. They would keep tightening, and wouldn't break even if he changed back into his human form.

"That's right," Harry said, willing his arm not to shake. "I know who you are, Sirius Black. My question is, why shouldn't I kill you?"

Dog Was Star

Chapter Summary

February 1994

Harry took a ragged breath, trying to calm himself down. Sirius Black, the man who had led to his mother's death. Dog or not, he was still Sirius Black

The dog struggled against his binds, giving Harry a hateful look.

"You aren't going anywhere," Harry said, his voice flat and emotionless. "Now, you can either—"

There was a scratch at the door.

"Watch him," he said to Lady Madeleine. "If he does anything, claw his eyes out."

"Meow."

"If you hurt my kitten," Harry said to the dog, "nothing will save you."

There was another scratch.

Harry backed towards the door, then spun around and opened it, wand at the ready. Something small, fast, and orange darted past. He quickly shut the door, wondering what the hell was going on.

It was Crookshanks.

The cat trotted right up to the dog and sat down.

"Great," Harry said, glaring at the cat. "Not only are you a murderer, you're an accessory to breaking and entering."

Crookshanks licked his paw, then began cleaning his ears.

The dog started growling again.

Harry took another breath. "Now, as I was saying. You can either transform back into a human, or I can make you."

The dog kept growling.

“Fine, we’ll do it the hard way,” Harry said, pointing his wand. “Fair warning, I’ve never done this spell before. If something goes wrong, don’t blame me.”

Harry gave the dog a moment to change his mind. When he just kept glaring at Harry, he began the chant. “*Homo homine homidio hominatum, Homo homine homidio hominatum...*”

A pale blue light shot out of his wand, narrowly missing Crookshanks who skittered away, hissing. Lady Madeleine began growling at him. Harry didn’t think she could fight off a full grown half-kneazle, but she wasn’t alone. He wouldn’t hesitate to disable Crookshanks if he interfered.

He continued the chant, watching one of the strangest things he had ever seen. It wasn’t the smooth transformation he’d seen from McGonagall, but much slower as a human head and limbs grew out of the dog parts. When it was done, Harry didn’t lower his wand, not knowing what Sirius Black might have up his sleeve.

“I thought you were bluffing,” Sirius Black said, his voice dry and creaky.

“Now you know,” Harry said, frowning. Something flashed in Black’s hand.

“*Expelliarmus!*” Harry snapped. The knife flew out of Black’s hand, and he snatched it out of the air. “Did you cut up Sir Cadogan too?”

“No,” Black said.

“Crookshanks,” Harry said as the cat tried to slink back to Black. “If you move so much as a whisker, you’ll soon share something in common with Mrs. Norris.”

Crookshanks stopped with one paw in the air, then sat down.

“Good cat,” Harry said. “What did you do this evening?”

“You’re not going to get a teacher?” Black asked.

“What I’m going to get is answers,” Harry said, narrowing his eyes. “You can either give those willingly, or continue pressing your luck. I can assure you the consequences will be unpleasant.”

Black started laughing. “Merlin, you sound just like him.”

“You do realize there is a Kiss-on-Sight order?” Harry said, unamused. “And I would wager that, after whatever events occurred tonight, the entire castle is being turned over. So, again, answer my extremely simple questions, or I will be forced to take action.”

“Fine,” Black said, coughing. “I’ll answer you. Put your claws away.”

Harry frowned. Black looked like shit. His hair was long and matted, his skin waxy with the pallor of death. He was skeletal, looking far worse than in his mugshot. His clothes were grey with filth and ragged. Harry felt an unwelcome pang of sympathy. Black was in desperate need of medical treatment, a hot shower, clean clothes, and regular meals.

Not thinking about it too much, Harry conjured a glass and filled it with water, then floated it over to Black. Black watched the cup approach him with hollow, hopeful eyes. There were so many things to eat on the grounds, in the Forbidden Forest and the Black Lake. Maybe being a dog made Black forget about those things. Maybe it was Azkaban. Either way, based on his appearance and trying to break into a magical castle with a knife, it was clear Black was not in his right mind.

“Drink,” Harry said. “Before I change my mind.”

Black gave him a wry grin, a shadow of the man he had seen in old pictures, and drank as Harry delicately tipped the glass towards him.

“That’s impressive control,” Black said, his voice sounding less hoarse.

“What happened tonight?” Harry asked.

“You were right,” Black said. “I did break into Gryffindor Tower.”

“How?”

Black looked at Crookshanks. “He brought me a list of passwords.”

Harry closed his eyes. “Someone wrote the passwords down. Crookshanks stole them, and delivered them to you.”

“Yes,” Black said, sounding somewhat amused.

“How long has Crookshanks been working for you?”

“I don’t know,” Black said. “Sometime in autumn. It’s hard to keep track of time.”

“When you’re a dog?”

Black shrugged.

“So you got into the common room using someone’s list of passwords, then what?” Harry lifted the knife he held. “What did you intend to do with this?”

“Kill him,” Black growled.

“Potter?”

Black gave him an alarmed look. “I would *never* hurt Monty!”

“Then who?” Harry demanded.

“Peter Pettigrew!” Black barked.

Harry stared at him, trying to put the pieces together. “Peter Pettigrew. Wormtail?”

Black gaped at him. “How do you know that name?”

“Irrelevant,” Harry said. “He was an animagus too?”

“*Is*,” Black stressed. “A rat.”

“A rat,” Harry repeated, glancing at Crookshanks. “You are claiming that Peter Pettigrew, a man who was blown up in the middle of London twelve years ago, is Ronald Weasley’s pet rat?”

“He’s the one who killed all those muggles,” Black growled. “He cut off his finger and scurried off into the sewers, like the pathetic, traitorous rat he is!”

“Scabbers went missing last night,” Harry said, looking at Crookshanks again. “If Scabbers is Pettigrew, he must have heard someone lost a list of passwords. He wasn’t safe in Gryffindor Tower anymore.” He looked at Black. “You realize how this sounds? No one would believe this story.”

Black narrowed his eyes. “You think I don’t know that?”

“So you got in, then what? Did you hurt anyone?”

“No! I went to look for Peter. Crookshanks tried bringing him to me, but he couldn’t. So I went into the boys’ dormitory and...” Black trailed off, looking down.

“I swear to god,” Harry said, “if you hurt any students—”

“I said I didn’t!” Black cried. “I cut up that kid’s bed curtains trying to find Peter. He woke up and I ran.”

Harry took a moment to formulate a response. “You are fucked in the head.”

“Again, do you think I don’t know that?” Black said, laughing harshly.

“Am I to conclude you escaped Azkaban specifically to kill Peter Pettigrew, who has been living as Scabbers?” Harry asked.

Black nodded.

Harry crossed his arms, tapping his wand. “Were you the Potter’s secret-keeper?”

Black looked at him sharply. “I was not. It was Peter. It was *always* Peter.”

“You intentionally spread it around that it was you,” Harry said. “You made yourself a target.”

“Yes,” Black said, watching him carefully.

“Professor Lupin knows you’re an animagus,” Harry said.

“Remus?” Black asked. “Yeah, he does.”

“What was James Potter?” Harry asked.

“A stag,” Black said slowly. “Why do you care?”

“The Marauder’s Map,” Harry said, shrugging. “Corroborating your myriad claims.”

“You have that?” Black asked, trying to sit up. “I should have thought of that. With that, I can ___”

“I don’t have it,” Harry said. “I am merely aware of its existence.”

Black sank back to the floor. Harry watched him, thinking.

Sirius Black was an animagus, he had seen it for himself. Pettigrew was allegedly a rat animagus. He knew Scabbers was very old, and had originally been Percy’s rat for years. If he was secretly a wizard, the longevity of an otherwise unremarkable rat was explained. The disappearance of Scabbers the day passwords had been stolen was very suspicious. And Crookshanks had regularly targeted Scabbers for months, all the way back to their first encounter in Diagon Alley, and no other pets. Scabbers’ health had been gradually getting worse since summer. Was it related to Black’s escape?

He needed to find Scabbers.

“You are an idiot,” Harry said.

Black looked at him again, frowning.

“Did you not think to tell anyone?” he asked. “Scabbers, or Pettigrew, could have been apprehended. Now he’s on the run. He could be anywhere. You could have owled the headmaster. You somehow contrived to send Potter a Firebolt, and yet you could not owl a single person with the full account of the events leading up to your incarceration?”

“You’ve worked that out too?” Black said, shaking his head.

“How did you do it?” Harry asked.

Black nodded at Crookshanks. “He took an order to the Owl Office for me. I put it under Monty’s name, but used my Gringotts account. Same with the book I sent you.”

“Me?” Harry asked, surprised. “Why would you send me anything? Wait, you mean *Legal Guidelines*?”

Black snorted. “Bookworm. You were attacked by dementors. That was my fault.”

“And Gringotts didn’t say a single fucking thing,” Harry muttered. “I guess Mr. Gittory should’ve signed that Goblin Bill of Rights.”

“Who?”

Harry sighed. “Amos Diggory, my stupid ex-boyfriend’s somehow more stupid father.”

“Oh, him,” Black said, grinning. “You let him down nicely.”

“You heard about it?” Harry asked. How the hell did Sirius Black know he had broken up with Cedric when Cedric didn’t even know?

“I saw it,” Black admitted. “When I was on my way to the castle on Halloween.”

“Great, that’s lovely,” Harry said, putting his face in his hand. “How have you been getting into the castle?”

“The cat’s been helping me,” Black said.

There was a noise in the corridor outside. Black began writhing around, but Harry only cast a silencing charm.

“No one can get in here when someone else is using the room,” Harry said. “They won’t even see a door.”

“What is this place?” Black asked, looking around. There wasn’t much to see since the Room had turned into an empty chamber. A thousand-year-old magical castle simply didn’t have muggle amenities. “I didn’t know there was a room here.”

“It’s not on the Map,” Harry said. “I’m not even sure where it exists most of the time. Suffice to say, it’s a safe location only known to me.”

Black looked at him again. “What are you planning to do now? I’ve answered your questions.”

“Some,” Harry allowed. “Without knowing what’s happening in the rest of the castle, it’s hard to say. Obviously you’re not going anywhere.”

“What do you mean?” Black asked, starting to struggle again. The luminous ropes binding him didn’t budge.

“I mean you’re a dead man walking,” Harry said calmly. “You have the entire world against you with only a universally disliked cat on your side. And me,” he added. “Should your claims about Pettigrew be valid.”

“It was him!” Black shouted. “I swear, I would never have betrayed James and Lily!”

Harry’s eyes tightened at his mum’s name. He had hated Sirius Black for years. Monty’s boggart was Sirius Black. And now he was being told the man was innocent, falsely imprisoned and tortured for over a decade, while the real culprit lived in the lap of Weasley luxury.

It was disgusting. It was unconscionable. It was heartbreaking.

“You are not rational,” Harry said flatly, leaning heavily on his occlumency to control his volatile emotions in the face of a panicking man. One of his mum’s closest friends. Someone who said he would have rather died than betray her. “You don’t even have a wand. You have spent months trying to get Pettigrew, and you have repeatedly failed.”

“I have to!” Black said, thrashing violently. Crookshanks ran over to him, heedless of Harry’s warning. “You don’t understand!”

“I understand perfectly,” Harry said. “You want to kill Pettigrew. That’s more important to you than clearing your name.”

Black stopped throwing himself around and looked at Harry again. “He deserves to die!”

“I don’t dispute that,” Harry said evenly. “Perhaps he will be executed after he is apprehended. As I said, you are not rational. By the way, I would like to apologize beforehand.”

“Before wh—”

“*Stupefy.*”

Crookshanks hissed at him.

“He’s going to get himself killed,” Harry said. “Why am I justifying myself to a cat?”

“Meow,” Lady Madeleine said.

“You’re growing up too fast,” Harry said, slowly approaching Black. He wrinkled his nose. Even wild dogs kept themselves cleaner than Black. If he had been able to think about anything other than his vengeance, he would have been doing much better. He could have stolen a wand, taken over some muggle house, got himself clean clothes and food, formed an actual plan without relying on the whims of some girl’s cat.

Harry was worried if he tried to clean Black off his clothes would dissolve, so he disillusioned Black, levitated him, and peeked outside of the Room. It hadn’t been that long since Black had attacked Ron’s bed. It would take some time for McGonagall to get there, and for them to begin searching the castle.

“Crookshanks, you will either follow my instructions or I will knock you out and dump you somewhere,” Harry said. The orange cat quickly left the room, chased by Lady Madeleine, and Harry stepped out, directing the invisible Sirius Black to float in the corridor. He closed the door and quickly walked back and forth, thinking of some place Black could stay for an extended period of time. He needed clothes, he needed a place to bathe, needed a place to sleep. Something so he wouldn’t get bored. A flat? Harry would have to bring him food. The house-elves would tell on them if he summoned one with Black around. Black would be dead before sunrise.

The door appeared again, and Harry hurriedly moved Black inside, the cats following. He snorted when he saw the room. It looked like a flat if it had been cobbled together from Gryffindor Tower. Harry looked around. There was a bedroom, with a four poster taken straight out of the Gryffindor dormitory. There was a shelf of books, but Harry didn’t stop to read the titles. Presumably things Black would find enjoyable. There was a bathroom, with taps that worked. Given the number of pipes in the castle, Harry wasn’t surprised to find some led to the Room of Requirement or had been rearranged to. Finally, the Room had

constructed a kitchenette and dining room. There was a wardrobe too, and after checking it for boggarts, Harry confirmed it contained clothes, though they were a little musty.

Harry removed the disillusionment from Black and woke him up.

“What?” Black mumbled, looking around in a daze. “Where am I?”

“I moved you,” Harry said. “You’re going to stay here for a while.”

“Peter—”

“No,” Harry said firmly. “Allow me to phrase this in a way that might penetrate that thick skull of yours.”

Black glared at him, baring his teeth. Harry added healing potions to his list of things to bring him.

“You care more about killing Peter Pettigrew than your own freedom,” Harry said, walking towards him and kneeling down. “That means you care more about killing Peter Pettigrew than you care about Monty Potter.”

Black shook his head. “I would do anything for Monty! But Peter—”

“You’d rather get your revenge and be run down like a dog than live and take care of Monty like you were supposed to,” Harry said darkly. “You’re not the only one who’s suffered these past twelve years.”

Black pulled back, discomposed. “What do you mean? He looked fine when I saw you two in Diagon Alley!”

“You didn’t see shit,” Harry said. “And maybe you’ll learn what I mean if you actually live through this.”

Harry stood and stepped back, dispelling the luminous ropes around Black. “Now, be a good boy and *stay*.”

Black rubbed his wrists, looking at Harry with unease. “You really do sound like Snape.”

Harry rolled his eyes, reaching into a pocket. “He’s my head of house.” He tossed a few chocolate bars and a Calming Draught at Black. “I’ll be back once the search, which has likely already begun, is called off. If you aren’t here, when I find you again you’ll wish the dementors had found you first.”

Severus was last to arrive at the headmaster’s office. He had been woken in the middle of the night. An event which would have once inspired cold fury now was a cause for concern. His

first thought hadn't been of Sirius Black, but that something had happened to his son.

It had, however, been Sirius Black. Somehow the man had got hold of the idiot Longbottom boy's list of passwords, which the even more idiotic Sir Cadogan had given the boy. It occurred to a total of zero people aware of these things to inform anyone. Sir Cadogan at least had the excuse of being a portrait. Longbottom was not, much good did it do him.

"Nothing," he said, shutting the door behind him. "Once again, Black has circumvented the defenses of this castle. One wonders how Hogwarts is still known as the safest place in Britain."

"I believe that largely has to do with my presence, Severus," Dumbledore said quietly.

"Yes, you have proven an effective deterrent to both the Dark Lord and his minions," Severus said, moving to stand next to the window.

"Severus," McGonagall said wearily.

He gave her a flat look. Longbottom was in her house. It was pathetic how little control she had over her students. Look what James Potter and Sirius Black had got up to under her leadership.

Not that Slughorn had been any better.

"At least we know what went wrong," Sprout said, her hair more nest-like than usual. "We can plan around that."

"Longbottom will no longer be given the passwords," McGonagall said. "And Sir Cadogan has been removed."

"That only works insofar as Black continues attempting to enter through the front door," Severus said. "Perhaps he'll next scale the tower and snatch Potter directly from his bed. He was close enough this evening."

"Severus, please," Dumbledore said tiredly. "We need to look into additional security measures."

"How are we supposed to secure against someone whose methods remain unknown?" he asked. "The dementors continue to be less than useless in preventing him from entering the grounds. The ghosts and portraits have seen nothing, and in fact are more than happy to help Black."

"I can charm the doors to recognize an image of Sirius Black," Flitwick said.

Severus opened his mouth to point out the flaws in this, but at a glance from Dumbledore kept his silence.

"What about security trolls?" Sprout suggested. "He broke in after the prefects were off. Round the clock security might be the answer."

Severus snorted. “A third-year could easily kill a troll.”

Sprout frowned at him. “They could at least delay him, sound the alarm.”

McGonagall cleared her throat. “Fred and George Weasley approached me. Apparently they knew of several secret passages unknown to Mr. Filch. He is currently barricading them.”

Severus stared at her. “It only took Black threatening to disembowel their brother to come forward with this information?”

“They are perfectly aware of the severity of their inaction,” McGonagall said. “And they will be punished.”

“How many times has a Weasley put the lives of the other students at risk?” He asked. “Do they breed for indifference to human life?”

“This isn’t productive,” Flitwick said, shooting Severus a look. “They are children. They are bound to make mistakes.”

Severus shook his head, disgusted, and looked out of the window as his colleagues continued making increasingly pointless suggestions. Morons.

Harry held his coffee up to admire its life-granting properties. He didn’t know how he would get through the day without it. Sirius Black was a loose cannon. He didn’t know if the man would remain in the Room of Requirement, or tear through the castle in his insane hunt for a rat, Crookshanks running at his side.

He hadn’t slept, staying up all night to record and methodically destroy his thoughts and potential plans. He thought about telling his dad, thought about his dad’s potential reaction to Black or Pettigrew should he believe Black’s tale. He thought about telling the headmaster. About going to Lupin. The problem was he’d have to tell them more than he wanted to. About the Marauder’s Map, about how he knew so much about Monty’s life and history. He wouldn’t with his dad, but his dad also had loose cannon tendencies. And all of those options—Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Remus Lupin—might make Pettigrew flee as frantically as he did from Sirius Black. Pettigrew had no reason to suspect a student knew who he was.

Finding a single rat when the world contained billions was a fool’s errand. Using a tracking charm on a rat, a rat that had disappeared over a day prior, whose tracks would have been trampled over as people moved around the castle...

Harry took a sip of his coffee, wishing it was hotter. He had a starving, severely emotionally disturbed man without a wand, a homicidal cat, a kitten, himself, and a map. If Pettigrew had,

for some stupid reason, remained on the grounds, there might be a snowball's chance in hell of finding him.

Lady Madeleine jumped onto the table, grabbed a kipper, and dragged it off to stuff into the bag Harry had charmed. He'd have either her or Crookshanks take it up to Black later.

He glanced at the Gryffindor table. Almost no one was at it, not that early in the morning. But there was Percy. Percy, who had unwittingly cared for a middle-aged mass murderer masquerading as a rat for years. Percy, who knew Scabbers and had a vested interest in locating him.

Harry took another sip of coffee, a new plan forming.

Give a Dog a Bone

Chapter Summary

February 1994

The sound of Penelope's quill scratching on her parchment was like nails on a chalkboard. Perhaps if he hadn't stayed up all night Percy would have been more tolerant. But Sirius Black had broken into Gryffindor Tower, had menaced his little brother with a knife, and had once again vanished without a trace.

Ronald was basking in the glow of his newfound fame. For once in his life he was getting all the attention. Percy didn't want to resent his brother's braggadocious behavior—all he had done was woken up when Sirius Black went after the wrong person—but it was easier to feel that than to feel like he had failed once again.

He should have known Longbottom couldn't remember passwords very well. He should have known the younger boy would write them down. He should have known Longbottom, who was prone to losing and forgetting things, would both lose the list of passwords and forget the passwords. Sirius Black had broken into Gryffindor Tower, and his brother could have died. All while Percy was asleep, blissfully unaware.

Anger was *much* easier to feel than guilt.

"Excuse me," someone said. Percy closed his eyes. He would know that voice anywhere. "I'm sorry for interrupting, but there is a matter I wish to discuss with the Head Boy."

"What is it regarding?" Penelope asked.

Percy sighed quietly, then turned to look at Harry. Harry was not wearing his school robes, nor any of his badges of office. Instead, he had a black jumper with a snake on it, one Percy's mother had knitted. His hair was a mess. Clearly the Gryffindors weren't the only ones who had gone without sleep.

"It's a personal matter," Harry said evenly. "Regarding another prefect." He looked between the two of them. "I'm sure you know of whom I speak."

Penelope had an obnoxiously knowing look as she turned back to Percy. "It sounds like Evans would be more comfortable speaking with you."

Percy's heart sank. He did not wish to discuss Harry's issues with Cedric Diggory. Had they begun dating again?

“Very well,” Percy said, standing to follow Harry. Listening to Harry’s romantic woes, painful as it would be, was the least Percy could do to begin making up for his mistakes.

He silently followed Harry into the Restricted Section, to Harry’s table where there were already several books and what looked like a small chalkboard.

“Has Diggory done something?” Percy asked, sitting down across from Harry.

Harry looked at him for a moment, then started laughing. “God no. That’s something I can handle myself. No, the prefect this matter is regarding is you. I just didn’t want to say what I wanted to talk about in front of Clearwater.”

Percy felt his ears go red and swallowed nervously. “What is it you wished to discuss?”

Harry crossed his arms on the table, leaning forward. “You know the fifth-year defense curriculum? Detection charms, revealing charms, tracking?”

“I do,” Percy said, hoping he wasn’t still blushing.

“Well, I was thinking of getting a head start in application. In preparation for O.W.L.s.”

Percy nodded. It was a sensible thing to do.

“And I know your brother’s rat recently went missing,” Harry said.

“We believe Scabbers is dead,” Percy said.

“The remains could still be found,” Harry said. “For a proper burial, you know. But what gave me the idea is I saw Granger’s cat lurking in the Forbidden Forest the other day. It’s the kind of place a cat would...deposit his trophies. Seeing as he hasn’t dropped it at Granger’s feet.”

Percy frowned. Maybe finding Scabbers’ remains would give Ron some closure. And it did sound like a challenge suited to Harry’s abilities. Finding a small animal who could have been killed, or have run off anywhere?

“What do you need my help for?” Percy asked. “I would think you were capable of this on your own.”

Harry looked down for a moment, flushing lightly. “You have access to a critical piece of evidence.”

“I do?”

Harry nodded. “The bloody bed sheet.”

Harry watched Percy walk away, then turned back to copying out the potions he needed. He wasn't sure if the house-elves had already taken the sheet for washing, it had been over two days since Scabbers had disappeared. But the Head Boy looking for it under the pretext of launching an investigation would help cover his tracks.

He had no idea where Pettigrew could be. He could have still been in the castle, listening in on conversations, running through the pipes, gorging himself in the kitchens.

He needed to get his hands on the Marauder's Map.

Or...

Harry pulled his list of things to do over, adding yet another item to the list. If there was a way to keep Monty uninvolved, he would take it.

He finished copying out the last potion, then began putting back the books. He could have nicked some potions from the hospital wing, but Madam Pomfrey was as draconian as Madam Pince and his dad when it came to keeping track of things.

Harry left the library, avoiding where he knew Percy was sitting with Penelope. He felt bad for deceiving Percy, but it was true the bed sheet would be useful, and he knew Percy was both skilled and had more of an interest than most in locating Scabbers. That Scabbers happened to be a middle-aged wizard who had already faked his death once was incidental.

Passing through the entrance hall, Harry spotted Professor Flitwick holding up a large portrait of Sirius Black to the front doors. Little did Flitwick know that Black had been using them the entire time.

Lupin knew.

Harry sighed, then went down into the dungeons. He would deal with Lupin later.

When Severus entered his potions lab after several exhausting hours of arduously conveying to the troll security squad what they were meant to do, he was surprised to see Harry already there. Even more surprising were the number of protective spells Harry had cast in the room. Was he worried Sirius Black would attack?

"Hi," was all Harry said before returning to mashing what looked like several coxcombs.

Severus had invited Harry to use the lab whenever he wished, though his son rarely did given the other demands on his time, not the least of which was his own budding skill in spellcrafting. Severus was therefore surprised to see him working on thirteen potions. Simultaneously.

He walked around, inspecting Harry's work. Blood Replenishing Potion, Bruise Healing Paste, Calming Draught, Demulcent Draught, Draught of Peace, Pepperup Potion, Dreamless Sleep. Forgetfulness Potion?

It seemed, at first, that Harry was getting an early start on his O.W.L. studies. But the more cauldrons he checked, the less likely that seemed. That Forgetfulness Potion, what looked like an earlier version of Skele-Gro before it had been standardized, Oculus Potion, Lurgy Liniment, Wit-Sharpening Potion.

"You are making Oblivious Unction," he said, coming to a stop next to Harry, who was vigorously crushing the brain-shaped coxcombs into a bloody red paste.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"To what end?"

"It's an alternative treatment for dementors, right?" Harry said. "They've got a Kiss-on-Sight order, and I don't think they care who's *on sight*."

Severus nodded. Having been attacked by dementors twice, it made sense that his son wanted more assurances against them. "What of these other potions? Brewing so many at once is... ambitious."

Harry snorted. "Doesn't that typify our house? Some are for O.W.L. review, some are for the quidditch team, some for personal use. I chose thirteen because it's a lucky number. To me, at least."

"Is it?" Severus asked, stepping over to check on Harry's potions again. It was a lot to keep track of, and his son looked like he hadn't slept at all. There was a slight manic edge to his words.

"I was thirteen when I first saw my brother," Harry said. "It's also when I learned you're my dad."

Severus paused in front of the Draught of Peace. He could tell from the pale silvery sheen that Harry had turned the moonstone into powder by hand. He had taught his son how to do that.

He watched the vapor for a moment, the characteristic spiral pattern, then he looked at his son, hard at work brewing potions.

"I see," Severus said. "It seems you have everything under control."

Harry looked up and smiled at him. "I did have a question for you. Not about potions, though."

"What is it?" he asked. He was tempted, as he often was, to finish Harry's work for him. It was frustrating to watch students struggling, not listening to directions, ignoring his advice, not comprehending instructions, purposely sabotaging their own work and that of others... There were a number of grievances he had. But Harry fell into none of those categories.

While there was no innovation happening—which Severus would have strongly advised against while simultaneously brewing thirteen potions—the potions were competently made.

“It’s about legilimency,” Harry said. “Are you able to tell when someone’s lying to you?”

“Due to latent legilimantic ability?” he asked. “If I actively use legilimency, almost always unless they are occluding. And even then there is typically some sign. Passively, the answer becomes more contextual. In some cases, yes.”

Harry glanced at him. “What does it feel like?”

Severus crossed his arms. “Has someone been lying to you?”

A troubled expression crossed Harry’s face. “I don’t think so.”

Severus sighed. If it was Diggory... “There is a dissonance. I cannot say whether it is what other legilimens experience. While legilimency is a rare ability, the skill to detect lies in such a manner is even more so. Of those I know, only the headmaster and the Dark Lord are capable of such a thing.”

“And you,” Harry said, smiling at him

“I do not profess to be as proficient,” he said honestly.

“Well, yeah, they’re geriatric,” Harry said, sprinkling powdered alicorn over the surface of his Draught of Peace. “I bet when you get to be that old you’ll be better.”

Severus shook his head and walked into his office. He had a ridiculous child.

Getting through gobstones training was harder than he thought. With the frequency of his prefect rounds, Harry was only able to make every other meeting. After accidentally capturing Sirius Black, learning what he suspected was the truth, his pockets stuffed with potions and food nicked from meals throughout the day, Harry was finding it difficult to focus.

The dismal atmosphere in the castle didn’t help. Filch had been running around all day blocking up the smallest cracks. Harry had passed by the statue of the one-eyed witch, both frustrated and relieved that it was finally dealt with. Frustrated, as Sirius Black had never even used it and wasn’t actually a threat to anyone other than Peter Pettigrew, and relieved because Peter Pettigrew knew about it too. As a rat, Harry suspected Pettigrew had done the majority of the exploring, and knew the castle better than almost anyone. He had to assume that was the case. And that whatever Pettigrew knew would be communicated to the Dark Lord or his followers, if Pettigrew was a Death Eater.

Maybe Black truly was insane, but Harry couldn't imagine the man would have been motivated to escape Azkaban after twelve years of suffering to chase after a random, innocent rat.

What troubled Harry was that Lupin had not recognized Scabbers. Had he never seen the rat?

What also troubled him, among many other things, was that Pettigrew had lived with the Weasleys for far longer than a normal rat should, and neither Arthur nor Molly Weasley thought it was unusual.

Twelve years as a rat. What did that do to a person?

"What do you think, Harry?"

Harry looked up from the game he was playing with Derek. Derek was shaping up to be a well-rounded player. He was learning from the best, a gobstones prodigy from a long line of prodigies. Well, at least one.

"What's that?" he asked.

"About Black," Killian said. "That's twice now he's broken in."

"And no one has any idea how he's doing it," Harry smoothly lied. At least four people knew. Sirius Black himself, Peter Pettigrew, Remus Lupin, and a fifth-year prefect who was in over his head. And two cats, but they couldn't really tell anyone.

Lupin.

Harry gritted his teeth.

"What do you think?" Killian asked again. "I don't think I've heard you talk about it."

Harry sat back on his heels. "We have no idea what he's been up to, nor what magics he has at his disposal. What we do know is that he can get past the dementors, and that only through a fluke was he able to enter Gryffindor Tower. It's a good thing Potter wasn't sorted into Ravenclaw."

"Why's that?" Derek asked, looking up from their game.

"To get into their common room, you answer a riddle," Harry said, a little surprised Luna hadn't taken him up there. Then again, she seemed to enjoy whatever advantage she had over the Bloody Baron, and liked the underwater view of the Black Lake.

"What about Hufflepuff?" Derek asked.

"You hit some barrels," he said. "If you get it wrong, well, it's sort of like gobstones, but a thousand times worse."

Derek grimaced and turned his attention back to the game. He was becoming a very cautious player, which made games with him take longer. Harry hoped to get him into the habit of

more quickly evaluating the field.

“Mum blames Dumbledore,” Killian said, looking at the game Vince and Bridget were playing. Tracey was helping Ethan with one of his essays, their game already concluded.

“He’s the worst thing that’s ever happened to Hogwarts,” Vince said.

Harry looked over at him, but his head was down. It sounded like Vince was repeating something he’d heard.

“I think that was the basilisk,” Harry said drily, shaking his head. “I don’t like Dumbledore, but I don’t deny he’s a powerful wizard. That doesn’t necessarily make him suited to being a headmaster, though.”

“Who else is there?” Tracey asked. “I think it would be worse if he went away.”

“What does he even do as headmaster?” Ethan asked, wiping his face off. He was getting better at hiding his disgust.

Harry had been asking himself that for years.

“His job is mostly administrative,” he said. “Hiring, firing, paying people, that sort of thing.”

“Sounds boring,” Derek said, finally making his move.

Harry stoically sat as he was doused in a pungent green liquid of indeterminate origin, then nodded. It did sound like a boring job.

Getting to the Room of Requirement wasn’t easy. Security trolls had been hired earlier in the day and were pacing through the corridors with their clubs. The entire floor stank to high heaven. Trolls, as Harry knew from both academic and personal experience, had senses uniquely attuned to hunting down humans. They were totally useless against an animagus, which Lupin would know. And yet, there were trolls in Hogwarts.

It didn’t help that Harry understood every word they said, his faithful Frankie translating every grunt and utterance. Most of the trolls’ time was spent comparing club sizes, but they also spent a considerable amount of time drooling and discussing their cravings for Harry’s fellow students, particularly the younger ones.

He silently watched one lumber past, dragging his club down the corridor. Harry was glad they weren’t mountain trolls, but it was small comfort.

Suppressing the urge to vomit, Harry paced back and forth until the door appeared, then slipped inside the Room of Requirement.

He was immediately set upon by a dog.

It took a moment to realize he wasn't being attacked, but that the dog was happy to see him. *Sirius Black* was happy to see him.

"Sorry it took so long," Harry said, pushing the dog down. He felt less wary of the dog than of *Sirius Black*. He knew they were the same, and that it was a stupid thing to think. Still. "I had a lot to do today."

The dog danced away, then sat down, panting.

Harry closed his eyes. "You can't be a dog all the time. I know it's probably easier for you. God knows it's easier for me."

The dog nodded, and suddenly *Sirius Black* was sitting there.

"Is this better?" *Black* asked.

Harry noticed that he had managed to clean himself up, and was no longer in the decrepit grey robes he'd probably been wearing since 1981. He was glad he had given *Black* one of his stronger Calming Draughts.

"Thank you," Harry said. "So, bad news, there's a shitload of trolls out there they've hired as security."

Black grimaced. "I should have expected something like that. Any sign of Peter?"

"It's only been a day," Harry said, taking potions out of his pockets and walking towards the table. "But I have a plan in motion. Start thinking of other places he might have hidden."

"What's all that?" *Black* asked, frowning.

"What I spent most of the day doing," Harry said. "Brewing potions so you don't drop dead."

"So you're a little potions master too?" *Black* asked.

"Far from it," Harry said, a little unnerved by the parallels *Black* was drawing between him and his dad. He began laying the vials out. "I have helped Professor *Snape* brew potions for the hospital wing, but so did most people last year during the flu outbreak. I'm actually helping him with Professor *Lupin's* *Wolfsbane*, if that means anything to you."

"*Remus* is getting *Wolfsbane*?" *Sirius* asked, sitting down across from him. Harry was glad he had calmed down since the night before. He really didn't want to restrain him.

"Yeah, I've been taking it to him," Harry said. "So, I'm throwing a pretty wide net here with these potions. They should treat most injuries you might have sustained, some symptoms of malnutrition, infections, low bone density, any breaks, long-term effects from dementor exposure. There's a modified version of *Dreamless Sleep*..."

Black nodded along as Harry explained what each potion was for. When he was done, he took out all of the food he stuffed into his pockets, smiling slightly as Black's eyes widened. It reminded him of his first feast at Hogwarts. He had never seen so much food in his life.

"You should eat first," Harry said. "Crookshanks is smart enough to get food from the kitchens if I'm not able to bring any. I can give him a bag to carry."

Black nodded, too distracted by the food to respond right away.

"How long do I have to stay here?" he asked between bites.

"A while," Harry said. "However long it takes for us to track down Pettigrew."

Black frowned at him. "How exactly am I supposed to do that trapped in a mysterious room?"

"It's a perfectly normal room at the moment," Harry said. "And I've been working on that too. I think it's a categorically bad idea for you to be running around as a starving dog while we've got dementors and trolls all over the place, and the school on high alert."

"You made that clear when you tied me up and stunned me," Black said.

"It could have been much worse," Harry said.

Black snorted. "Yeah, it could have actually been Snape and not his little doppelganger."

Harry rolled his eyes. "People have said I'm his favorite student before, but no one's taken it that far. Should I be flattered?"

"No," Black said bluntly.

Harry snorted, and Black grinned at him.

"What's your plan?" Black asked, licking his fingers. Harry pretended not to notice. He wasn't to judge a starving man.

"For you?" Harry said. He reached into his pocket again, and pulled out a thick sheaf of paper. He set it on the table, and Black leaned over to look.

"A map?" Black asked, looking up at Harry. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Is it not obvious? You're going to remake the Marauder's Map."

Thestral Call

Chapter Summary

February 1994

It was a big day for Charity Burbage. The house-elves had made crumpets.

Charity Burbage loved crumpets. She particularly loved them with strawberry jam and cheddar. Severus was an unwilling participant in the culinary monstrosity she was on the verge of creating.

“Is this a crumpet which I see before me,” Charity intoned, “the butter toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.”

Severus sighed, floating the butter away from her. Her hand clutched at empty air.

“I have thee not, and yet I see thee still,” Charity breathed, her eyes blown wide. “Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible to marmite as to jam? Or art thou but a crumpet of the mind, a false creation, proceeding from the pikelet-oppressed brain?”

Severus set the butter down just as there was disturbance at the Gryffindor table. A large barn owl had landed before Neville Longbottom, a red envelope in its beak. Longbottom took the Howler and ran.

“Poor kid,” Charity said, slathering her crumpets with butter. “He’s been banned from Hogsmeade. Shame Gryffindors don’t play the bongos like us to get into the common room.”

“I would rather sleep in the corridors than perform such an asinine task,” Severus said.

“Someone would eventually come around to let you in,” Charity said, grinning at him as she piled jam on. “That’s what they’re doing with Longbottom. He’s got to wait outside of the Fat Lady with the trolls.”

Severus sighed as the dulcet tones of Augusta Longbottom's vitriol rang through the Great Hall. “That boy has the ability to perfectly recall anything related to herbology, and yet a simple password eludes him.”

Charity snorted. “If you think Sir Cadogan’s passwords were *simple*, you’re off your nut.”

“What do I have to do to never hear that turn of phrase again?” he asked.

Charity turned to him and smiled. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Then she took a bite out of her crumpet.

Monty sat quietly across from Hermione. Most of the time he spent with Hermione was quiet, but the silence between them had grown tense with the disappearance of Scabbers. Hermione was adamant that Crookshanks was simply acting in his nature. Cats chased rats, it was the way of the world. Yet Crookshanks seemed to have it out for one particular rat.

He didn't know how his friends were going to recover from this, or if they even could.

Hagrid had asked him and Ron to go down to his hut. Having helped Hermione and Hagrid work on Buckbeak's hearing, Monty already knew the hearing had been moved up by two months, and that Hagrid and Buckbeak were soon headed for London. The information had caught Ron off guard, as he had refused to spend any time with Hermione since Christmas. First the Firebolt, then Scabbers.

Ron had been under the impression that Hagrid wanted to hear about Sirius Black, which Ron had been talking about nonstop for days. It rankled Monty. It was a terrifying experience, and he felt bad for Ron having gone through it, but he made it seem like an adventure. Not like there was a man trying to kill him.

It wasn't fun. It wasn't exciting. It was horrible.

Hagrid hadn't cared at all, given Buckbeak's life was on the line. He had spent their visit dressing Ron down for how he had been treating Hermione. Ron didn't want to hear any of it, and Monty mostly agreed. Crookshanks was out of control, everyone had known it for months. Of course it ended in tragedy.

And then there was the upcoming Hogsmeade visit. Monty doubted he'd be allowed to go. He still didn't understand why it mattered. Sirius Black had been in his dormitory. What was he going to do in Hogsmeade that he couldn't do with Monty right in front of him, asleep? And why had Black run?

Sighing, Monty looked up from his book. "The hearing's in three days, Hermione. I don't think there's much else we can find."

Hermione didn't respond. She only turned another page and jotted down another note.

Something butted up against Monty's leg, and he looked down to see Lady Madeleine holding a scroll in her mouth. Monty leaned down to take it, and she ran off.

Smiling, Monty opened it.

Destroy after reading. The walls have eyes. And ears. And other appendages.

Monty rolled his eyes and kept reading.

I know I sound paranoid, but this is serious. Don't try going to that room, the security trolls make it impossible. Don't drop your guard around them. They've been saying some revolting things.

Regarding Hogsmeade, the twins spilled after what happened to your mate. I'm not going this weekend either.

I heard about the hearing, maybe you could visit Buckbeak after? Also, I know the owl's been out to see the thestrals. If you two want to go, take Hagrid with you. The Forbidden Forest isn't safe at the best of times, but I've seen some strange things in there lately.

It's her birthday soon, right?

Monty let the scroll roll back up. He'd have to leave the library to *destroy* it, he couldn't just make fire appear like Harry did. He'd probably burn the place down if he tried. If Lady Madeleine had stuck around, he could have written a note back, but she was still a kitten and probably hadn't thought of it.

It was a wrench about the Room of Requirement, but Monty understood. He remembered Harry fighting that mountain troll in first year. How he had encased it in molten metal. Monty had nightmares about it for ages. The security trolls seemed well-behaved, but if Harry thought they might be a problem Monty was inclined to believe him.

Luna's birthday.

Monty smiled to himself. At least he had something good to look forward to.

Percy's correspondence with Auntie Muriel had been going well. The elderly woman wasn't a fool, she knew when someone was trying to use her. For example, a nephew of hers trying to curry favor with members of the International Confederation of Wizards by bringing his wealthy aunt with a Wizengamot seat to a muggle ballet. Fred and George had already been written out of her will due to their little stunt on Christmas. It was a cruel prank to play on an elder, regardless of how caustic she was.

He wanted to inherit her Wizengamot seat. The only other person who was a Prewett was his mother's squib cousin, who had been thoroughly excised from the magical world. The rest were dead, of old age or murder, or had married out. That left his mother and his siblings.

And Auntie Muriel had intimated that he was her choice. When and how she had made that choice, Percy didn't know.

They mostly spoke about their family, the Prewett family. What his aunt did on a daily basis. Happenings in the Wizengamot, with her friends in Godric's Hollow. Current events. Percy didn't know Auntie Muriel well, despite her constant presence in his life. She didn't know him very well. As she often mentioned, she was one hundred and three years old. What had she seen in her lifetime? What had she done? How much time did they have left?

There were subjects he avoided, of course. Penelope Clearwater. What his aunt had assumed about him. Things he wouldn't talk to his own parents about. Things he wouldn't talk to his few friends about. There was one person, but that presented its own issues.

Would he understand?

Percy hoped, after having dug around beneath Ron's bed, a singularly horrific experience, he would.

Carrying around Ron's old bed sheet all day was beyond the pale. And yet here Percy was, walking into the Restricted Section to deliver the sheet. Hopefully it would crack the case wide open.

"Hey, Percy."

Percy froze, then turned to see Harry standing in an aisle.

"You're looking...furtive," Harry said, smiling at him.

"Evans," Percy said, regaining control of himself.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Head Boy Weasley. What can I do for you this afternoon?"

"I have acquired the item you requested," Percy said, pulling Ron's old bed sheet with Scabbers' blood on it out of his bag.

Harry's smile widened, and he took the sheet from Percy. "I thought the house-elves must've already got it. That's brilliant!"

"It was nothing," Percy said, willing himself not to blush. "If you need any other assistance, please do not hesitate to ask."

"I might, actually," Harry said, frowning at the sheet. He looked back up at Percy, his expression softening. "You'll be the first to know."

Percy nodded. "Have a good afternoon."

"You as well," Harry said.

He could feel Harry watching him as he walked away.

He needed to write another letter.

Harry watched Black pace back and forth. He knew after spending years in Azkaban that confinement would be an unpleasant experience. He had no idea what else to do to keep the reckless man safe, from both himself and others.

“It would be helpful,” Black said, coming to a stop, “if I had a wand.”

“I don’t know what you want me to do about that,” Harry said. “I’m not giving you mine.”

Black glared at him.

“What about a family wand?” Harry suggested.

He laughed harshly. “You think a Black would leave their wand around for someone unworthy to use? They’re burned.” Black started pacing again. “I can’t stay in here. I can’t...”

It had only been a week.

“Do you have a better idea?” Harry asked.

“I could be out there!” Black snapped. “Out there hunting Peter!”

“You’ve been *out there* for months,” Harry said. “It didn’t exactly work out, did it? You want to go live in the forest with the dementors again?”

Black turned away.

“Don’t you have a house?” Harry asked. “You must have lived somewhere before Azkaban.”

“I rented a flat,” Black said. “I lived with Remus for a time. He’s got a cottage. But that’s not where Peter is!”

“What about a family estate?” Harry asked. “You’re from an old pureblood family.”

Black snorted. “I wouldn’t step foot in that house again if it was the last building on earth. I’d rather live under a rock. Hell, I lived *on* a rock!”

“You have a house,” Harry said flatly. “And you chose to eat out of bins for months? Don’t tell me, you’ve also got a house-elf you haven’t summoned?”

Black’s shoulders tensed.

Harry sat up. “You’ve got to be fucking joking. You have a bloody *house-elf*? You didn’t think that maybe a house-elf would be useful when you’re in hiding from the whole of Britain?”

Black was silent for a moment, letting Harry’s words hang in the air. “You have no idea what that elf is like. You have no idea what my family was like.”

“He has to obey your orders,” Harry said. “Who cares what he’s like? He’s enslaved by magic. You’re out to murder a man, why would you refuse such a useful tool?”

Black turned to look at him. “You’re being sarcastic.”

Harry shrugged. “The point still stands. Even if you hate your house-elf, he would have been useful. Could *still* be useful if you actually care about capturing Pettigrew and clearing your name.”

Shaking his head, Harry stood up. “If you do decide to lower yourself and request the assistance of your family’s servant, you need to make sure he doesn’t betray you. There was an incident with a house-elf last year who did just that. I can help make a list of instructions for your house-elf.”

Black remained silent.

Harry sighed, then took his wireless out of his bag.

“A friend of mine gave this to me,” he said, setting it on the table. “Be careful with it.”

With that, Harry left Black to his thoughts.

Entering and leaving the Room of Requirement was a risk with all the trolls around. He couldn’t make many visits, not with all the other things he had going on. He did it as quickly as possible, and hoped the trolls were too oblivious to notice any extra doors.

Harry knew he was in deep shit.

He was harboring a wanted criminal in the very castle everyone was trying to keep him out of. Sirius Black had too many issues for Harry to manage on his own. Black couldn’t take care of himself. His entire life was reduced to killing Peter Pettigrew, and he didn’t care what happened to himself in the process. How was a fifteen-year-old meant to deal with that?

Harry could barely deal with his own issues, and mostly did so by avoiding them. He had to live with the memory of his former boyfriend saying the words Harry had always feared someone would say. He’d remember it at the most inconvenient times. He’d remember it every time he took off his binder to wash. He’d remember it whenever he saw Cedric in the corridors. Cedric didn’t have to live with the memory, Harry had taken it from him. He got to walk around like the happy idiot he was, not a care in the world.

He wished he could talk to his dad about Black, but he worried one or both of them would end up dead. There wasn’t anyone he could talk to.

Harry wrapped his arms around himself, passing a few security trolls who grunted about him being a *pretty boy*. Even the stupid trolls knew he was a boy.

“Meow.”

Harry looked around and saw Lady Madeleine peeking around a corner.

“Did you find him?” Harry asked quietly.

Lady Madeleine turned around and ran off. Harry quickly followed her through corridors, up and down staircases, ending up somewhere on the third floor in a dusty, empty chamber. Crookshanks sat in the middle, waiting next to Mrs. Norris.

“Good, we’re all assembled,” Harry said, shutting the door. He trusted Crookshanks’ senses were keen enough to detect any potentially eavesdropping rats. Lady Madeleine joined the two older cats, sitting like the adorable little princess she was.

Harry removed the bloodstained bedsheet, setting it down for the cats to examine.

“Crookshanks and Maddie already know,” Harry said. “But there is a rat loose in the castle. He is Ronald Weasley’s pet rat Scabbers.”

Mrs. Norris blinked at him.

“Crookshanks has been wrongfully accused of the murder of Scabbers,” Harry said. “Our mission is to locate Scabbers. Do not engage. This means no chasing, okay? If you find Scabbers, rendezvous with Crookshanks or Maddie, and they’ll find me. Scabbers is possibly armed and extremely dangerous.”

Mrs. Norris meowed plaintively.

“It’s my duty as a prefect,” Harry said. “Mr. Filch doesn’t need to waste his time on trivial matters such as this.”

Mrs. Norris blinked, then walked to the closed door. Harry sighed, then went to open it for her, watching as she ran down the corridor and disappeared.

“She knows the castle better than you two,” Harry said, turning to Crookshanks and Lady Madeleine. “But she’s only loyal to Filch. Crookshanks, you know the grounds like the back of your paw. I know you’re hot to trot, but don’t engage. He could turn back at any time.”

Crookshanks stared at him for a long moment then ran out of the room.

Harry packed away Ron’s old bed sheet, not happy with having to handle it so much.

“Meow,” Lady Madeleine said.

“Took the words right out of my mouth.”

Monty wasn't entirely sure what was going on with Ron and Hermione. Something about Buckbeak being sentenced to death had brought them together again, and Ron had said that, with Scabbers dead, his parents might get him an owl. He couldn't imagine brushing off Hedwig's death like that.

He was happy that they had reconciled, even if it took something like a hippogriff being killed over scratching someone. If Buckbeak was going to die, he might as well have full on gored Malfoy. In for a penny.

Yawning, Monty hurried down the grand staircase, his invisibility cloak rippling around him. He had woken up early to avoid having to make any excuses for not bringing Hermione and Ron along on Luna's birthday excursion. Neither of them would have been able to see anything anyway, so it was no big loss.

He spotted Luna right away. She had on lilac robes and was twisting around, making them flare out. Harry was there too, standing next to a large floating bucket and reading a book. He closed it just as Monty stepped off the staircase, then opened the front doors.

Harry went first, the bucket trailing after, then Luna, and Monty slipped out behind them. The sky had barely begun to lighten, the sun not yet visible.

"Happy birthday, Luna," Monty said.

She didn't seem startled by his presence. "Yes. I think it will be."

Smiling, Monty walked with them across the wet grass, towards the dark trees of the Forbidden Forest.

"Thestrals are twilight creatures," Harry said as they approached the treeline. "They are most active from dusk until dawn."

Once they were under the trees, Monty took off his cloak. "What's the bucket for?"

"Food for them," Harry said. "They're carnivorous, and are drawn to the scent of blood. It's another thing that gives them a bad reputation, being carrion-eaters. But they hunt as well. Thestrals are more opportunistic than anything."

"Is it okay to be here without Hagrid?" Monty asked, looking around the shrouded forest.

"It's not okay for us to be in here at all," Harry said, grinning at him. "The headmaster makes a point of saying that every year."

"It'll be fine, Monty," Luna said. "Harry won't let anything happen to us."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence," Harry said. "We aren't going that far in. Hagrid took his fifth-year class to see the herd a few weeks back."

They walked for a few minutes in silence. The trees grew closer together, and the twilight deepened.

Harry stopped walking and lowered the bucket to the ground.

“What now?” Monty asked him.

“Now we wait.”

Luna suddenly let out an ear-piercing shriek. Monty jumped and got his wand out, but Harry doubled over in laughter.

“What was that for?” Monty asked her, baffled.

“It’s a thestral call,” Luna said, cupping her hands around her mouth to shriek again.

“That’s fantastic, Luna,” Harry wheezed, clutching his sides. “I didn’t want to wake up the whole castle, though.”

“Should I not do it again?” Luna asked, her pale eyes searching the trees.

“I think they heard you,” Monty said, staring into the gloom. Two spots of white grew larger and larger. He’d seen them hitched to the carriages at the beginning of the school year, but after the dementor on the train it had been hard to focus on much of anything. Up close, they were much bigger.

The first thestral that reached them looked around for a moment, then headed directly to the bucket filled with chunks of bloody meat.

Luna walked up to the thestral and began petting his neck.

“I think his name’s Tenebrus,” Harry said as Luna hugged the thestral. “That was the name of the first thestral that showed up when Hagrid brought the class out here.”

“They look like dragons,” Monty said, stepping aside to make room for another thestral. “I mean, what I thought dragons would look like before I’d actually seen one.”

“Pretty cool, right?” Harry said, turning to smile at him.

“Yeah,” Monty said, reaching up to pat the nose of the nearest thestral. “They are.”

Harry stood quietly as Lupin drank his Wolfsbane, thinking.

Black was doing better after two weeks than Harry had expected. He had only broken into Hogwarts twice since his escape, so Harry imagined Black had a lot of down time. He still

didn't know what exactly Black had been doing between break-ins. He had considered administering the Draught of Living Death if Black got it into his head to run around like an idiot again.

Harry didn't want to deprive Black of his agency, but so far his actions had only driven Pettigrew into hiding. If Crookshanks hadn't stolen those passwords, Pettigrew wouldn't have been spooked. Hogwarts was huge. There were hundreds of chambers, hundreds of pipes, the entire Forbidden Forest, the Black Lake if Pettigrew was desperate. And if he had even stayed at Hogwarts.

Black was making some headway on remaking the Marauder's Map, and it kept him preoccupied. He still hadn't called his house-elf, though, and Harry knew he could be doing more too. He would need to ask Monty to borrow the original Map, under some pretext. With the security trolls around, Monty sneaking out of Gryffindor Tower after hours was out of the question.

He briefly imagined what Lupin would do if he told him Pettigrew was alive. He'd probably think it was a bad joke, or that Harry was being mean. He'd want actual proof. So would his dad. So would the entire world. And without Pettigrew, he didn't have it. Even some extrajudicial Veritaserum wouldn't cut it.

"Is everything alright, Harry?"

Harry looked over at Lupin, who had finished his Wolfsbane. He'd been looking worse as the year progressed, despite the potion. Harry couldn't imagine what it would be like to lose all of his friends in one fell swoop. What it would be like for the one you blamed to suddenly enter your life again.

Harry had been trying to understand Lupin's silence, why he clung onto such old secrets when he believed, like everyone else, Monty's life was at risk.

"I'm fine, sir," Harry said, smiling at Lupin. It wasn't a problem he would be solving that evening. "Just thinking about O.W.L.s."

Rats Saw God

Chapter Summary

March 1994

Harry spooned another bite of shepherd's pie into his mouth. It was warm. He knew it was supposed to taste good.

He couldn't taste a thing.

It had been a month since he found Sirius Black, or Black found him, and progress was so slow as to be nonexistent.

Harry still had to go to class. He still had essays to do. He had his prefect duties, and on the nights he didn't have rounds he had gobstones.

Interacting with Black was a trial. Black was manic, shifting from bouts of deep depression to frantically trying to recreate the Marauder's Map he and his three friends spent years working on. He chafed at being kept inside, was mortally afraid of the dementors, was obsessed with finding Peter Pettigrew. He was prone to ranting, to shouting, to crying, to getting trapped in memories of his friends or memories of Azkaban. Often Harry would find Black in his dog form. Emotions were easier for a dog, and Harry suspected Black spent the majority of his time as one. That he had for years

He needed to find Peter Pettigrew. He knew Black was reaching his limit. They both were. Things were going to start slipping through the cracks. Harry had already stopped working on Benjy. He hadn't touched his hurdy-gurdy in ages. He didn't have time to skate around the dungeons. What was any of it next to capturing the real culprit?

He had to live under all the security measures knowing they were completely pointless. He was barely spending any time with his friends, but with the last quidditch game against Hufflepuff coming up, half of them were too distracted to notice. Not to mention O.W.L.s. Harry knew he wasn't going to fail any, but he wanted to get straight Os.

He felt guilty for even caring. It all seemed so stupid and trivial next to what had been done to Sirius Black. Next to Peter Pettigrew.

He hated Pettigrew. Harry hated him more than he had ever hated Sirius Black. He understood Black's desire to hunt the man to the ends of the earth. Betraying Monty's parents. Killing all those muggles. Staging his own death. Sirius Black in Azkaban for twelve years. Monty having to live with the Dursleys. Contributing to the deaths of Monty's parents wasn't enough, Pettigrew also deprived Monty of the other people who loved him most.

Monty could have had Sirius Black as he was, not the man Azkaban had made him. He could have had a happier childhood. Harry could have...

Living as Scabbers. Sleeping in the same room as Harry's brother for *years*. Harry shied away from imagining what sorts of things Pettigrew *could* have done. They were dark, disturbing thoughts. The sooner he caught Pettigrew, the sooner he could sleep again.

"Are you alright, Harry?"

Harry turned to Astrid, who was watching him with concern.

"I'm fine," he said. "Just tired."

Harry looked down at the gluey remains of his shepherd's pie and decided he wasn't very hungry. He checked his watch.

"It's almost time for Transfiguration," he said, picking up his bag.

Astrid frowned at him, but didn't push. She slung her bag over her shoulder, and they left the Great Hall together. "What are we doing today?"

Harry was at a loss. He pulled a piece of parchment out of a pocket, checking his schedule for that day. "Vanishment. Snails."

Astrid looked at his parchment. "Haz, it's blank."

"Is it?" he said, putting it away again. He had charmed his schedule so only he could read it. Having *Sirius Black* on the itinerary would invite awkward questions.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she asked. "You've been really..." she waved her hand around. "You know."

"Just thinking about O.W.L.s."

"That's months off," Astrid said.

"The thing about time, Astrid," Harry said, "is that it keeps happening. Months become weeks become days, and the next thing you know you're trying to vanish a snail in front of an examiner but you turn it into a slug instead. Was it animal to animal transfiguration, or did you just vanish its shell? Now you've got a Dreadful on your Transfiguration O.W.L. and all your hopes and dreams are dead."

Astrid stared at him for a moment, then broke out in a wide grin.

"What?" he asked, bemused.

"If you can still talk like that, you're fine."

Harry tossed a few *Daily Prophets* on the table, most of them featuring Sirius Black's mugshot. Black stopped messing with the wireless and gave the papers a disdainful look.

"There you go," Harry said. "Nothing's changed. We're still surrounded by dementors, still got trolls lurching about the corridors. The world's still out to get you. Crookshanks is searching the grounds, and I've got Maddie looking around the castle. Mrs. Norris too, but I'm not going to rely on her."

Black nodded, still looking at his own image. He was starting to look better in person, now that he wasn't sleeping rough and living off of scraps.

"What about you?" Black asked, looking up at him.

"What about me?" Harry asked.

"You're name's Harry, right?" Black asked.

"Harry Evans," he said. "Fifth-year Slytherin prefect, at your service."

Black snorted. "Prefects. Remus was the prefect in our year. Dumbledore must've thought he could reign us in." His expression darkened. "When I get my hands on Peter—"

"You'll do nothing," Harry said. "If you care about Potter." He knew Black had almost no self-interest. Pointing out that capturing Pettigrew would allow him to be a free man didn't work. Mentioning Monty did. "If you're trying to convince me that you should be out looking yourself, it's not going to work. What you've been doing *hasn't* worked. The sooner the map is finished, the sooner we find him."

Black let out a frustrated breath. "Do you know what happened to the original one? I know Filch got it after—" A look of fury crossed his face.

"I've already checked Filch's office," Harry said. "It's not there."

Black raised his eyebrows. "A prefect, breaking into Filch's office."

Harry shrugged. "It was a matter of necessity."

Black looked at his prefect badge. "A prefect, and gobstones captain?" He looked back up at Harry, amused. "You play gobstones?"

"That you reduce gobstones to a mere *game* that one *plays* exposes your ignorance," Harry said. "Few can appreciate the nuance of gobstones, fewer still the intricate stratagem the combatants wield."

Black gave him a blank look. "It's gobstones."

"Exactly."

Monty sighed in relief when Professor Trelawney finally released his hand. They had been studying palmistry lately, and every class she would go on about how long his Life Line was.

Monty didn't think it was the most interesting thing about his hands. Every part of the hand was broken down and evaluated. There were tons of different lines. The Head, Heart, and Life Lines. Each finger represented a different planet. The creases were Rings of Saturn or Girdles of Venus. And not everyone had all of the lines. The Lines of Mars, Mercury, Apollo. Health, Nutrition, Love. Solomon's Ring. The Line of Fate. Monty had one on his left hand, but not on his right. He wasn't sure what it meant, the book only covered the basics.

Their book did have charts of famous palms, like Napoleon and Josephine. There was the shape of the palm to consider, the shape of fingers and joints and nails. The wrist and its rascettes. The mons of the palm and fingers, the fleshy spaces between lines.

Under the little finger was the Line of Intuition, the Mount of Luna. It represented imagination, intuition, creative ability, and motivation. There were so many aspects to evaluate. The apex, areas of development, its size and contours, its color. The fine lines that ran across it.

Palmistry was an intricate, complex area of study, but most of his classmates were too busy giggling at having to hold each other's hands. It didn't help that Ron's was usually clammy or sticky. Hermione didn't take it seriously at all. Monty had asked her why she hadn't dropped the class, but it was inconceivable for her to abandon any course of study.

Professor Trelawney was too focused on the length of his Life Line. True, it spoke to longevity, but it wasn't a smooth line. There was a star near its beginning, a sign of danger. Voldemort, Monty knew. If his parents had looked more closely at his hands as a baby, would they have known?

A good portion of it was chained. Instability.

Something tugged at his robes, and he looked down to see Lady Madeleine staring up at him, a note in her mouth. Monty looked around to see if anyone else had noticed her, but Professor Trelawney had seized Neville's wrist and was orating about his palm.

Monty bent down and took the note.

"How did you get up the ladder?" he whispered.

Lady Madeleine ignored him and climbed into his bag. Ron was distracted by whatever was going on with Neville, so Monty opened the note Harry had sent him.

I hate to ask this, but could I borrow the map? I've been wondering how it works. We could look at it together if you'd like. I'll be in the Owlery before dawn.

Maddie is only allowed to eat meat. Don't let her talk you into anything else.

Monty slipped the note into his pocket. He hadn't been checking the Marauder's Map at all, which seemed stupid in retrospect. It would have been useful after Black had broken into the dormitory. He could have found out where he had gone.

He glanced at the kitten shifting around in his bag. Why was Lady Madeleine staying with him? Was she supposed to protect him from Sirius Black?

Deciding he'd ask Harry about it when he saw him in the morning, Monty returned to studying his hands.

"Are you related to Lily?" Black asked, pausing in his circuit about the room.

Harry didn't look up from the copy of Jasmine's map he'd given Black. Black had spent his time filling in the blank areas. His memory of the castle was impressive, but it was getting to the point where Harry would either need to get him a wand to finish the work, or contribute himself. He didn't trust Black with a knife, and he definitely didn't trust him with a wand. He was glad Black hadn't tried to take his already.

Sirius Black was dangerous. He was an adult, he was desperate, and Harry had taken away some of his control over the situation. Harry worried the benefits—food, shelter, safety, allies—didn't matter that much to Black. Harry *knew* they didn't. Black willingly deprived himself in some bizarre exercise of martyrdom.

"Who?" Harry asked, sliding papers around. Jasmine had done a map of each floor, but the Marauder's Map showed them all. There was a lot of folding involved.

"Lily," Black repeated

Harry looked up at him, pretending to think. Black stared intently back. "Lily *Potter*?"

"When I met her she was Lily Evans," Black said, grinning at him. "So are you one of her cousins? I know she has a sister. Are her parents still alive? Did you..."

Harry kept looking at Black as he rambled, keeping his expression blank. He was too tired for this. "I've never heard of her."

Black stopped talking, his brow furrowing. "But, your name?"

Harry sighed. "Are you related to Frank Black?"

Black gave him a puzzled look. "Who?"

"He's a muggle musician," Harry said, looking back down at the map. He needed to ask Monty for the original one. He couldn't keep this up for much longer. At the rate he was going, it was all going to fall apart. "There are a ton of muggles with the surname *Black*. Thousands. Hundreds of thousands."

"I'm a pureblood," Black said.

"And I'm a muggleborn," Harry replied. "What's your point? Having the same name as someone doesn't make me related to them."

Black sat down, looking put out. Harry shook his head and went back to examining the map.

"A muggleborn in Slytherin," Black said after a moment. "Suppose there's a first for everything."

"I doubt it's the first time," Harry said drily.

"You sure you aren't related to Lily?" Black asked.

Harry shook his head. "No. I'm an orphan. Everyone related to me is dead."

Black frowned, leaning back in his chair. "I've been trying to work out why you're helping me."

Harry gave him a flat look. "It's the right thing to do."

"You were in Diagon Alley with Monty last summer."

Would he have to Obliviate Black at the end of this?

"We ran into each other," he said.

"It seemed like more than that," Black said. "I know you two were staying there."

Harry sighed. "I don't have a place to stay during holidays, and the Leaky Cauldron is cheap. Potter was kicked out by his relatives or something. You'll have to ask him."

Black gave him a skeptical look. "Did Snape put you up to it?"

"Put me up to what?" Harry asked. *Control your emotions. Discipline your mind.*

"He and Lily were friends," Black said. "Until fifth year, at least. They grew up together."

"That's interesting, I guess," Harry said. "But that hasn't got anything to do with me."

He met Black's eyes. He needed to put an end to this line of thought.

“If you’re looking for some underlying motive, there isn’t one. If you want to know about my family, fine. My mum abandoned me shortly after I was born and died a few years later, from what I’ve been able to find. She never told anyone who the father was. I haven’t got anyone else, and I’ve been on my own since I was eight. It’s not something I particularly like talking about. I haven’t even told my friends. Does that answer your burning questions?”

Black pulled back. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed.”

“It’s fine,” Harry said, rubbing his temples.

“You just seem to care about this a lot,” Black said. “About Monty. Like you said, no one else would have thought twice about turning me over, or outright killing me.”

“That’s because the concept of due process doesn’t exist in the magical world,” Harry said, exasperated. Black was suspicious of him for what? Being a half decent person? “Did you even get a trial? I’ve read all the Death Eater trials, and I don’t remember seeing your name.”

Black laughed harshly. “No, I didn’t.”

“There you have it,” Harry said. “So, what was the name of that charm? I have a pass to the Restricted Section. I can look it up tomorrow.”

A small *meow* and the pinpricks across his skin alerted Harry to Monty’s presence. He turned away from Hedwig and looked at the entrance to the Owlery. Lady Madeleine jumped up the last step, and Monty was close behind her.

“Sorry I’m late,” Monty said, walking up to him. “The trolls tried to stop me, so I had to go back for my cloak.”

“I’d like to send a strongly worded letter to whoever’s idea hiring trolls was,” Harry said.

“The Fat Lady said she wouldn’t do the job without them,” Monty said. He walked up to Hedwig and stroked her feathers, while Lady Madeleine clawed her way into Harry’s robes.

The Owlery was one of the few safe places in the school. A rat wouldn’t be hanging around so many predators, or in a place so many people went. Harry didn’t know how Crookshanks had picked up on what Scabbers truly was. Lady Madeleine’s odd reaction to Sirius Black in Diagon Alley, calmly accepting the large dog’s presence, made him think it was some kind of kneazle ability. Hedwig had been around Scabbers for years and hadn’t attacked him.

“She’s a portrait,” Harry said. “I’m not sure how to explain it, but they aren’t really people. They act like people because they’ve got some of their subject’s memories, but they aren’t that person.”

“How does that happen?” Monty asked, looking away from Hedwig.

Harry smiled at him. "You could talk to the Fat Lady about it, I'm sure she has some interesting stories."

Monty looked skeptical. "Maybe." He reached into his bag and pulled out the aged parchment that was the Marauder's Map. "I've got this. Honestly, I think you'll get more use out of it than me. You have to patrol the castle right?"

Harry took the Map. "Right, since I'm a prefect."

"Then you can use it for that," Monty said, smiling.

"I think that goes against its purpose," Harry said. "It's to avoid getting caught, not to catch people."

"So?" Monty said. "They shouldn't have got it confiscated in the first place."

Harry smiled, looking at the parchment in his hand. It would be richly ironic if the very item Pettigrew had lost was used to catch him.

He hadn't told Monty who had made the Marauder's Map. Harry intended to, after he caught Pettigrew. Or maybe Sirius Black would, once he was exonerated. Black could tell Monty all sorts of things about his parents.

So could Lupin.

"Thank you," Harry said, hiding the Map in his robes. "I promise I'll keep it safe."

Harry checked the Marauder's Map as often as he could. In bed, during his rounds, in the lavatory.

Hogwarts itself was a mess of students and ghosts and cats, all jumbled together. He saw Lupin's name on the Map, so he knew they hadn't made exceptions for themselves. And McGonagall, so he knew animagi showed up, at least as humans. What about rats? Rats and mice were often considered pests, would they have bothered to include them? It wasn't like they all had names. Did having a name qualify one for the Map?

The grounds were easier to search, but he only ever saw Hagrid, or the Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures classes. Sometimes he'd see doubles or triples of Hermione and Percy avoiding their past selves, off the beaten paths.

The Map did not show what was inside the castle walls. Pettigrew could have been down in the Chamber of Secrets, living off a rotting basilisk carcass.

Sirius Black had only been one of four people working on it. He didn't know all of the ins and outs, and it had been years since the man had done any magic. Besides turning into a

dog. Harry didn't feel great about manipulating Black, but what was he supposed to do? Let him run around with a knife, scaring third-years? Turn him over?

Black had been complaining about something new. Harry tried to be patient and listen to the man, but it was hard to keep track of all of his ranting. It was better than the silences. Something to do with the new map he was working on.

If it was important, Harry was sure he'd eventually remember.

"Mother and I have been discussing my plans for after graduation," Penelope said.

Percy looked up from his Muggle Studies essay, a persuasive piece either for or against the Obliviation of muggles. Percy had struggled over which to choose, because with either there were caveats, exceptions. Professor Burbage knew that, and Percy wasn't quite sure what point she was making by having them choose hardline stances.

"Have you?" Percy asked.

"I'm planning on taking a sabbatical," Penelope said. "It would be an excellent experience, seeing the world together."

It took Percy a moment to realize she was including him in this *sabbatical*.

"I agree, it would be a good experience," Percy said. He looked around at his work. "I need to get another reference book. Excuse me."

He walked away from their table. There was absolutely no possibility of him going on a year-long holiday. With what money? He couldn't afford to take a year off. He needed to start work immediately. Even if he *could* afford it, he would choose better company.

Percy had been trying to think of an exit strategy. The timing never seemed right, with holidays and N.E.W.T.s coming up, not to mention they worked together as Head Boy and Head Girl. But now it seemed their paths were diverging after graduation. It was perfect.

He looked around for a book to take back and was surprised to find himself in the Restricted Section. It had been a few weeks since Harry announced he would track down Scabbers. Had he made any progress?

Percy walked towards Harry's table, where he was pleased to find him poring over a book.

"Good evening, Evans," he said neutrally.

Harry jerked, then looked at him. He smiled in a way that made Percy feel...

"Good evening, Weasley," Harry said teasingly.

“Any success?” Percy asked, walking closer. He looked at the books Harry had selected.
“Household pests?”

“Do you know how many rats there are in the world?” Harry asked.

“I would assume a large number,” he said.

“At least one per person,” Harry said. “And there are billions of people. Rats are considered vermin by muggles. They blamed them for the Black Death. Have you heard of it?”

Percy nodded. “It killed millions of muggles.” As startling as the total muggle population was, to know that millions could die and for it to be only a small fraction was staggering.

“It was the fleas that spread it,” Harry said. “Rats and other rodents often infest muggle buildings. Do you know what they don’t infest?”

“Magical buildings?” Percy guessed.

“Precisely,” Harry said. “There are all sorts of magical pests that there are spells and potions for. Garden gnomes, jarveys, doxies, pixies, you name it. Rats? Not a single thing that I can find, unless you count transfiguration. Rats have never been an issue for magical people.”

“We have rarely been concerned with the muggle world,” Percy said, sitting down across from him. “To our detriment, it seems.”

“Presently, yes,” Harry said. “I was wondering, how did you get Scabbers? He’s been in your family a long time, right?”

“Since I was five,” Percy said. “My mother found him in the kitchen one day.”

Harry’s smile froze on his face, then fell away completely. He jumped out of his seat.

“What’s wrong?” Percy asked, also standing.

“I’m such an idiot,” Harry said. “Maddie!”

Lady Madeleine was at his side in an instant, leaping into his arms.

“Percy, remember you promised to help me?”

“Yes,” Percy said. What was Harry so agitated about?

“I know where he is,” Harry said, his expression growing harder. “I need you to come with me, and I need you to prepare yourself.”

Harry walked quickly out of the Restricted Section, tucking his kitten into his robes.

“Prepare myself for what?” Percy asked, hurrying after him.

“You were five,” Harry said. “Did your mum find him in the fall, by any chance?”

“She did,” Percy said. “She said he was probably inside because of how cold it was.”

Harry shook his head. “Fall of 1981. It all fits. God fucking damnit.”

“Harry, what’s the matter?” Percy asked. “If it’s about Scabbers, Ron’s already got over him, it’s not—”

“Everything is about Scabbers,” Harry said darkly. They crossed the entrance hall. “Twelve years is a long time for a common rat to live, isn’t it?”

“I suppose,” Percy said as they hurried into the basement. “You think he’s in the kitchens?”

“There’s plenty of food and water,” Harry said. “He’s surrounded by house-elves to protect him. It’s Unplottable. I should have thought of that. I should have known right away, because *he* would have known.”

Harry stopped in front of the painting of a giant fruit bowl, the entrance to the kitchens. “I’m going to need you to trust me, Percy,” he said, looking up at him. “I promise I’ll explain everything. For now, just follow my lead. Keep your wand ready, and don’t say a word.”

Percy was utterly baffled, but did as Harry requested. It was only Scabbers.

Harry tickled the green pear then grabbed the knob it turned into. He opened the door to the kitchens, where the house-elves were busily cleaning up after dinner.

“Did Mr. Evans miss dinner again?” one elf asked, running over. “Flopsy can get a plate ready!”

“That would be wonderful,” Harry said, his demeanor completely changing.

“And what about—”

“That will be all, Flopsy,” Harry said, cutting her off. Percy frowned, surprised at seeing Harry behave so rudely.

Harry took his kitten from his robes and set her carefully on the floor. She began sniffing, lifting her tail in the air, and slunk towards a pile of burlap sacks. Harry walked after her, motioning for Percy to follow.

Lady Madeleine sat in front of a sack of apples, looked at Harry, then backed away. Harry pointed his wand at the apples.

“*Evanescio pomum*,” Harry whispered, vanishing all of the apples. The sack deflated, and something small thrashed around inside of it. A blast of red light struck the sack, and it stopped moving.

“Evans,” Percy said, watching as Harry pulled the limp, emaciated body of Scabbers out of the burlap. He couldn’t believe Harry’s rough treatment of Scabbers. “Surely such force is not necessary. What has got into you? He is only a rat!”

Harry held Scabbers by his neck, and Lady Madeleine began growling. “He’s not a rat, Percy.”

“What?” Percy demanded. “What are you on about?”

“Flopsy,” Harry said, ignoring him. “I need you to fetch Professor Snape, Professor Lupin, and Professor Dumbledore. Tell them to come to the kitchens immediately. I have captured an animagus.”

“Yes, Mr. Evans!” the house-elf said before disappearing.

“Scabbers is not an animagus,” Percy said, taking a step forward. “Really, now. I can—”

“Do you want to bet your brother’s life on it?” Harry asked. “Fine, I’ll show you. We have some time until the cavalry arrives. *Rennervate*.”

Scabbers woke up, and began squeaking and thrashing. It was painful to watch his old rat being treated so harshly. He didn’t think Harry could be so...cruel.

“Change back or I’ll break your fucking neck,” Harry said, gripping Scabbers tightly. “Don’t tempt me, Pettigrew.”

“Pettigrew?” Percy took a step forward, not sure what to do.

Harry shook Scabbers, and Scabbers, to Percy's astonishment, began to change.

The door to the kitchens burst open, and Professor Snape strode in.

“Evans?” Snape said. “What is going...”

Snape came to a sudden stop next to Percy, and they both watched in stunned silence as Harry punched a cowering Peter Pettigrew in the face.

The Ides of March

Chapter Summary

March 1994

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all of your comments! It's exciting to hear that you've been talking to your friends about this, that it helps make your day better. I wish I could respond to you all individually. I hope you all know I appreciate you!

Severus swept through the dungeons, the house-elf's message replaying itself. *Mr. Evans says Professor Snape is to come to the kitchens. He says he's caught an animagus!*

Black was an animagus. It was a theory they had bandied about, but it presented several issues. When had he become an animagus? What animal? What spells could they use to admit certain animagi but not others, such as McGonagall?

Did Lupin know?

That his son had been the one to apprehend Black was not surprising. Harry was almost overbearing in his protectiveness of Potter. His behavior had subtly changed since Black had broken into Gryffindor Tower. Harry had been paler, quieter, looking more tired as the days and weeks progressed. And now his son was holding the man in the kitchens of all places.

The kitchens. Not only had Black sent the world into upheaval and brought dementors to Hogwarts, he was taking food right out of their mouths. The arrogance. Azkaban hadn't changed that about Black.

He couldn't wait to see the dementors perform the Kiss.

Severus stormed into the kitchens, house-elves scurrying from him. He saw Weasley first, the eldest currently enrolled. Unusual, but perhaps Harry had run into him. He came to a stop beside the gangly boy.

"Evans, what is going—"

There was a sickening crack, and Severus watched as his son broke the nose of a man who was twelve years dead.

“Fulgari,” Harry snapped.

Severus stood dumbly as luminous cords wrapped around Peter Pettigrew, tightening around the man who was moaning about his crushed, bleeding nose. Harry stood by as the man rolled around on the floor.

“Pathetic,” Harry said, shaking his hand out. Harry turned to look back at him. “We’ve captured Peter Pettigrew.”

Severus stared into his son’s eyes, thrown off balance by the turn of events. Harry, in a show of trust, easily allowed Severus into his mind.

A black dog in Diagon Alley. Potter talking about a dog watching his quidditch match. An oddly blurred memory of four names. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, Prongs. The disappearance of Scabbers. A black dog knocking Harry back into a room. Binding the dog. The dog shifting into Sirius Black. Interrogating Black. Anxiety, fear, grief, regret, exhaustion, desperation, anger. Incandescent rage. The long search for Scabbers. The conversation with Weasley. The realization.

Severus pulled back, and looked at where Pettigrew lay on the ground, making more disgusting, piteous noises. His son had been harboring Black in the castle for weeks. His son hadn’t trusted him not to kill Black on sight. Hadn’t trusted anyone.

His son should have been able to trust him.

Weeks of tolerating Black’s presence, making sure the man didn’t get himself killed, trying to uncover the truth. Barely able to sleep or eat. The fear of what Pettigrew would do if he knew someone else was searching for him.

Severus closed his eyes, just as the doors to kitchens opened again.

“I was having tea with Minerva,” Dumbledore said affably. “What this about an animagus, Mr. Evans?”

Severus turned to see the headmaster and McGonagall walking towards them.

“Ronald Weasley’s pet rat Scabbers,” Harry said, his eyes not leaving Pettigrew. “Peter Pettigrew has been pretending to be Scabbers.” Harry turned to look at Weasley, who was staring at Pettigrew in silent horror, then looked back at Pettigrew, his wand never wavering.

“What are you talking about Mr. Evans?” McGonagall said, moving closer. “Peter Pettigrew is—”

She gasped when she saw the man, who had pushed himself into an upright position and was looking at them all plaintively.

“Professor McGonagall,” Pettigrew whined. “Headmaster! It’s so good to see you again!”

“Liar,” Harry said.

“Mr. Evans, please,” Dumbledore said, stepping forward. “I believe we can handle this from here.”

Harry looked at Dumbledore. “My apologies, sir. It’s surprising to see a rat who has been sleeping in a room filled with children turn into a middle aged man.”

“Please stand back with Mr. Weasley,” Dumbledore said. “We will discuss your role in this shortly.”

Harry nodded and picked up his kitten, who was getting too large to be referred to as such. He hesitated, then moved to stand near Weasley.

“I’m sorry,” he heard Harry whisper. Weasley just shook his head, still staring at the man who had pretended to be his younger brother’s pet.

“We thought you were dead,” McGonagall said faintly.

“Obviously Pettigrew faked his own death and framed Black,” Severus said.

“Perhaps we should continue this discussion in my office,” Dumbledore said.

Severus looked around the kitchens, which had come to a standstill as the house-elves enjoyed the show.

“Mr. Evans, Mr. Weasley,” McGonagall said, “return to your common rooms.”

“No, Minerva,” Dumbledore said, wandlessly levitating Pettigrew. “They will be joining us in my office. Please contact the aurors. Amelia and Kingsley, if you would.”

“Of course, Albus,” McGonagall said, giving Pettigrew one last look before hastening out of the kitchens.

It was a grave procession to the headmaster’s office. Curfew was near and the corridors were blessedly empty, lit by the dim glow of Pettigrew’s bindings.

Severus had spent years loathing Black, both while they were in school and after his betrayal of Lily. But Black had never betrayed Lily. He had broken out of Azkaban to extract justice from the one who had. The one to discover this truth, the one to catch the traitor, was Severus’ son. His son was his former antagonist’s only ally. His son, who hadn’t trusted him enough to get his assistance. Who believed that no one would accept the truth unless he shoved the proof in their faces.

Pettigrew wept and begged the entire way through the castle. Imploring Dumbledore, desperately calling out to Weasley, crying at a passing Sir Nicholas whose head flopped over as he swung around to watch Pettigrew float past. Severus was tempted to viciously curse him into silence, but knew that Pettigrew needed to make it mostly intact to the aurors. It was what Harry wanted.

“Not a word,” Dumbledore said to the ghost.

“Yes, headmaster,” Sir Nicholas said, drifting away.

The gargoyle leapt aside, and they ascended to the office. McGonagall was waiting for them, standing next to the fireplace.

“They should be here in a moment, Albus,” she said, giving Pettigrew a repulsed look.

Dumbledore lowered Pettigrew into a chair, and the glowing ropes Harry had conjured loosened themselves to bind Pettigrew to it.

“If you would all have a seat,” Dumbledore said, settling down behind his desk.

Severus moved to stand next to the window. This whole time, it had been Pettigrew. The snivelling man who had trailed after Potter and Black like a lost puppy. Severus had been revolted by Pettigrew’s behavior back then, and still was. *This* was who Lily chose as a secret-keeper? Who had delivered her to the Dark Lord?

“An interesting spell, Mr. Evans,” Dumbledore said over Pettigrew’s pleading. “I imagine you learned it specifically to use against animagi?”

“Against anything that can change its shape,” Harry said.

“I see,” Dumbledore said. “Ah, it seems our other guests have arrived.”

The fire burned green and Amelia Bones stepped through, followed by Kingsley Shacklebolt and pink-haired Nymphadora Tonks.

“You!” Tonks said, pointing dramatically at Harry.

“Me,” Harry said, smirking at her.

“They made you gobstones captain?” Tonks said, walking over to examine his badge. “I thought Lament was taking the piss!”

“Nymphadora,” Bones snapped. “You are still in training. Don’t make me regret bringing you.”

Tonks’ hair turned blue and she shuffled back to join Shacklebolt, who was staring at Pettigrew. “Sorry, Madam Bones.”

“Is that Peter Pettigrew?” Shacklebolt asked.

“What is going on here, headmaster?” Bones asked, looking from Pettigrew to glare at Dumbledore.

The door to the headmaster’s office flew open and Lupin rushed in.

“Headmaster,” Lupin gasped, “I’m so sorry I’m late. I was with a student. I—”

“Remus, my old friend!” Pettigrew cried.

Lupin froze, then turned to look at Pettigrew.

“Peter?” he whispered, looking stricken. “But...how...”

He collapsed into a chair, tears forming as he stared at Pettigrew.

“I’m sure that will soon become clear, Remus,” Dumbledore said, waving his hand to silence Pettigrew. “I believe we have Mr. Evans to thank for discovering Peter.”

The room turned its focus on Harry. Severus watched his son carefully. He was quietly composed, looking from the aurors to the headmaster. Weasley sat rigidly next to him.

“Yes,” Harry said. “A student’s pet rat fled Gryffindor Tower the night before Sirius Black broke in. I decided to search for the rat and discovered he was an animagus.”

Dumbledore watched Harry for a moment, then turned to Pettigrew.

“It seems there is more to the events surrounding Lord Voldemort’s defeat than we knew,” he said mildly.

“What do you mean, Dumbledore?” Bones asked.

“Is it not obvious?” Severus said. “Pettigrew is clearly the one who gave the Potters to the Dark Lord. He is the one who caused that explosion and killed those muggles.”

Lupin made a broken noise, hiding his face in his hands. “They switched secret-keepers. They never told me.”

“Nor I,” Dumbledore said solemnly. “A misdirection, no doubt.”

Pettigrew struggled violently against the ropes, shouting soundlessly, blood still trickling down his face.

“Sirius Black is innocent,” Harry said quietly. Severus looked sharply at him, but Harry continued. “You’ve kept an innocent man in Azkaban for twelve years. Without trial.”

Bones visibly paled, then turned to face Pettigrew. “We will have to investigate these allegations. This is not a matter for a school to handle.”

“No, I dare say it is not,” Dumbledore said, looking over his glasses. “And I shall have to insist that the Ministry remove its dementors immediately.”

“I will speak with the Minister,” Bones said stiffly. “Shacklebolt, Tonks. We’re bringing Pettigrew in.”

“You may take the chair with you,” Dumbledore said.

The aurors left the way they came, taking Pettigrew with them. Severus watched him disappear into the flames.

Dumbledore sighed, then looked at Harry.

“Now, Harry,” the headmaster said. “Where is Sirius Black?”

Lupin jerked upright, turning to look at Harry. McGonagall’s mouth thinned into a grim line. Even Weasley, who appeared to be catatonic, looked at Harry.

“I’m sure he’s around somewhere,” Harry said. Lady Madeleine jumped onto his lap and glared around the room.

“Mr. Evans, please,” McGonagall said. “If you know where he is...I’m sure his name will be quickly cleared.”

Harry glanced at her, then looked back at the headmaster. “I may know where he is. It is perhaps possible I could ask him if he is willing to speak with someone.”

“I can personally guarantee Sirius’ safety within Hogwarts,” the headmaster magnanimously offered, “if that is your concern.”

Harry watched Dumbledore for a moment longer, then picked up his kitten and stood. “Can Percy come with me?”

“If he wishes to,” Dumbledore said.

Weasley nodded stiffly, then stood to follow Harry out of the office. Severus watched the door shut behind them.

“This is a nightmare,” McGonagall said, reaching for a seat to fall into. “Twelve years, Albus.”

“I know, Minerva,” Dumbledore said, turning to look out of a window. “We have made a grievous error. We can only hope it will now be corrected.”

Severus sighed as Lupin started crying again.

Percy and Harry walked in silence, Lady Madeleine pacing at Harry’s side. A few corridors away from the headmaster’s office, Harry stopped and leaned against a wall. Percy turned to face him.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, looking at the floor. “I’m so sorry, Percy. I didn’t want to lie to you, but the truth was so outrageous...” He shook his head, then looked up at Percy, his eyes shining. “I’m sorry.”

Percy was still in a state of shock. His family’s pet rat had actually been a man named Peter Pettigrew. For twelve years they had taken care of a murderer. He had slept in Percy’s bed.

He had slept in *Ron's* bed. It was nauseating to contemplate.

"Wasn't I a good rat?"

Percy closed his eyes. None of them had noticed. No one had even suspected. Except Harry.

He needed to pull himself together.

"You have nothing to apologize for," he said. "You have uncovered a decade-long plot, and reasonably assumed any help you asked for would be met with skepticism. I regret my family's role in aiding Pettigrew."

"It's not your fault," Harry said, wiping his eyes. "It's really fucked up."

Percy laughed despite himself. "It is, as you say, fucked up."

Harry smiled hesitantly at him. "I don't think I've ever heard you laugh before."

Percy turned away to hide his blush. "It is known to happen on occasion."

"Well, I hope I have occasion to hear it again," Harry said smoothly, pushing himself from the wall. "Alright, time to see a dog about a man."

"Beg pardon?"

Harry laughed quietly, then led Percy up to the seventh floor, shying away from the security trolls. Percy frowned at the waste of resources. At the months of effort put in to try to secure a castle against a man who turned out to be no threat. The real criminal was in their midst the whole time. In his little brother's bed.

What was he going to tell his parents?

"I'm going to show you a big secret," Harry said, grinning at him, dispelling his dour thoughts. "It's a room that only shows itself to people in need."

"And you needed to hide a fugitive," Percy said, looking at a tapestry of some trolls doing ballet. He grimaced, then turned to watch Harry pace in front of a bare stretch of wall.

"Stand back," Harry said. "I'm not sure how he's going to react."

Everything felt surreal. He'd caught Pettigrew. He'd actually done it. It was only just occurring to Harry that he definitely did not want his role in the matter to be known. That it was a mistake to have attacked Pettigrew. The man would remember it. Dumbledore had obviously known the aurors; he knew everyone, he'd been at Hogwarts for decades. Maybe they could say the house-elves discovered Pettigrew?

He looked at Percy to make sure he was a safe distance back, then opened the door to the Room of Requirement.

“Mr. Black?” Harry said, stepping inside. “I’ve got some good news.”

The dog bounded over to him, jumping up on his hind legs.

“I found him,” Harry said, patting the dog’s head, hoping Black would calm down.

“Pettigrew’s been arrested.”

The dog stopped moving.

“I know you wanted to be there,” Harry said quickly. “Also, the headmaster wants to see you. I think he—”

The dog transformed back into Sirius Black, and he seized Harry in a bear hug. “I can’t believe it! You actually did it! How? When?”

Percy cleared his throat and Black froze, still holding onto Harry. He looked at Percy warily.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Percy said, “but the headmaster has requested your presence.”

“There’s other people too,” Harry said, extracting himself. “Professor McGonagall, and Professor Lupin. And Professor Snape.”

Black’s expression grew dark, but he straightened his robes and nodded. “Lead the way.”

“You should turn back into a dog,” Harry suggested. The dog appeared in Black’s place and padded out of the room, turning his nose up as he passed Percy.

“Lead the way,” Harry muttered, following the dog. He looked at Percy, who was nonplussed at seeing yet another animagus.

“He is more rational than I expected,” Percy said as they walked back to the headmaster’s office.

Harry sighed. “I’ve been hiding him in there for almost two months.”

“Two months,” Percy repeated. “That room is not very far from the entrance to Gryffindor Tower.”

“No,” Harry said, wrinkling his nose as they passed by several trolls. “It’s not.”

Severus did not know what to expect when his son returned with Sirius Black, but it certainly wasn’t a large black dog bounding into the room. Black could have at least had the decency

to arrive as a human.

“Sirius,” Lupin gasped, crumbling once again. Severus looked away from the appalling sight of two lifelong friends reuniting, instead watching his son close the door behind him and Weasley.

“My dear boy,” Dumbledore said, standing up. “I am so sorry for what has been done to you.”

The dog looked away from Lupin, then transformed into Sirius Black. “Harry says Peter’s been arrested?”

He sneered at the familiarity with which Black addressed his son. Black had seen his son more in the past two months than he had. What influence had the detestable man had?

“You’ve been hiding in the castle?” McGonagall asked.

Black took a seat uninvited. “The kid’s been hiding me in some mystery room for a few weeks.”

“Mr. Evans?” McGonagall said, looking at Harry.

Harry sighed. “I ran into him the night he broke into Gryffindor Tower. And yes, I hid him in the castle.”

“He tied me up and interrogated me,” Black said happily. Severus closed his eyes. Years later and he still wanted to strangle the man. False imprisonment or no.

“Mr. Evans,” McGonagall repeated, scandalized. “I understand you are a prefect, but that is taking your role too far! You should have got a professor!”

Harry was silent for a moment, looking at Weasley of all people. “Would any of you have believed me? Why do you think I caught Pettigrew first?”

“I believe, given the circumstances, we can overlook this lapse in judgment,” Dumbledore said, smiling kindly at Harry. Harry looked blankly back.

“I wouldn’t call it a *lapse*, headmaster,” Severus said coolly. “Evans acted in the interest of justice.”

“How forgiving of you, Snape,” Black said, grinning at him.

Severus ignored him.

“Just so,” Dumbledore agreed. “The question now is, what do we do with you, Sirius?”

Harry was sent back to his dormitory, unnecessarily told to keep silent about the events of that evening. Black had been escorted to the hospital wing by Professors McGonagall and Lupin.

A bare handful of people knew Black was innocent.

He hoped his dad wasn't mad at him.

Who was going to tell Monty?

He was glad the other boys were already asleep when he entered his dormitory. They probably wouldn't have asked him questions, accustomed to the odd hours he kept. He got dressed in his pajamas, climbed onto his bed, spelled his curtains shut, and curled into a ball. Lady Madeleine pressed against him, purring.

He had caught Peter Pettigrew. He knew Tonks was a good person like her mum. He had heard good things about Amelia Bones. They weren't part of the Ministry which had sent Black to Azkaban without a trial. Madam Pomfrey was a good healer, she would be able to help Black get better, physically at least.

He covered his head with a pillow. Pettigrew. A servant of the Dark Lord. The one who had brought him to the Potters.

What would the Dark Lord think of Harry exposing such a loyal servant? Someone who had been in hiding for years, possibly awaiting the Dark Lord's return?

Harry Evans...I will remember you...

He shuddered at the memory of that cold, sibilant voice. The promise in it.

It was fine. It would be fine. Sirius Black would recover, he would be exonerated, Monty would get his godfather back, and the real traitor would face justice.

He laughed harshly. *Would* Pettigrew face justice? Or would the Ministry try to cover it up? Would Dumbledore testify? He was the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, the Supreme Mugwump of the ICW, and the headmaster of Hogwarts. What was the point of all that political power if it couldn't save one man?

Harry reached into a pillow, fumbling around for a vial. He needed to sleep. He had class in the morning. After everything, he still had to go to class.

"He knew."

"Severus," the headmaster said. "Now is not the time."

“Lupin knew,” he insisted. “There is no possibility that *two* of his school friends just so happened to become animagi behind his back!”

“I don’t disagree,” Dumbledore said. “I will speak with Remus in due course.”

“I suppose his saving grace is that Black is actually innocent,” he said drily. “Not that he knew that. He was as surprised as the rest of us.”

“Excluding Harry, it seems,” the headmaster said. “Even I testified that Sirius was Lily and James’ secret-keeper. They were quite convincing.”

Severus sighed. He doubted Harry wanted to be associated with this. Severus knew his son had acted on behalf of both his own and his brother’s interests. Perhaps they could frame it as him simply doing his job as a prefect. Had Harry approached him, they could have worked on a way for Harry to distance himself from the chaos that would inevitably erupt once word got out.

Sirius Black innocent.

Fallen hero Peter Pettigrew alive.

He’d be seeing Black’s face in the *Daily Prophet* for months yet.

He needed to speak with his son.

“What are you going to do now?” Severus asked as Dumbledore stood.

“I am going to speak with Madam Pomfrey,” the headmaster said, walking to the door. “And then I will be departing for the Ministry. Oh, and Severus?”

“What.”

“Please tell the security trolls their services are no longer needed,” he said. “You do have a way with them.”

Tell-all

Chapter Summary

March 1994

“Meow.”

Harry pushed his face deeper into his pillows.

“Meow.”

“Go away,” he mumbled. He moved his tongue around his mouth, annoyed he had forgotten his retainers.

Lady Madeleine put a paw on his arm, then dragged her claws lightly down his skin.

“Stop it,” Harry said, trying to push her away. She dodged his attempt by jumping on his side.

“Your legs are too sharp,” he said, wincing as she prodded a tender spot. “What time is it?”

Harry grabbed his watch from his bedside table, rubbed his eyes, then looked at the time.

He sat bolt upright and leapt out of bed. Adrian, Cassius, and Terence were already gone. There was only an hour until Charms started. He had never slept so late in his entire life.

Harry raced through his morning routine, feeling strangely light as he did the bare minimum to get ready for the day. Lady Madeleine, who had been sprawled on his bed, jumped at him and Harry caught her in his arms. She sank her claws into his robes and refused to let go.

“I can’t keep carrying you around all the time,” he said, racing through the common room. Everyone else was already at breakfast. What was going on?

As he sped through the dungeon corridors, Harry remembered what had happened the night before.

Catching Pettigrew. Pettigrew’s arrest. Sirius Black taken to the hospital wing.

He hugged Lady Madeleine, slowing down as he reached the steps leading into the entrance hall. The sun was obnoxiously bright, sparkling off the grand marble staircase. He could hear the clatter of cutlery and dishes in the Great Hall, the conversation and laughter less subdued than he had become used to.

Harry readjusted Lady Madeleine and walked into the Great Hall. He wasn't sure where to look first. At the head table he saw his dad talking to Professor Burbage. The headmaster was missing, as was Professor Lupin. A familiar voice caught his attention, and he saw Monty chatting happily with his friends at the Gryffindor table. Percy was there too, staring off into space. Harry knew he owed Percy a better explanation. Percy wasn't an idiot, he must have known Harry didn't sporadically intuit that Scabbers was Pettigrew. What must have Percy thought of him, threatening to break a rat's neck?

He walked to the Slytherin table, attracting his friend's attention.

"Where've you been?" Astrid demanded, moving her bag so he could sit down.

"I didn't go to sleep until late," Harry said, trying to detach Lady Madeleine. She still wouldn't let go. Sighing, he poured himself some coffee and blinked when a quiche appeared before him.

"Maddie, I need to eat," he said, successfully removing his oversized kitten and settling her in his lap.

"We thought you'd already got up," Terence said. "Not that we'd try to wake you."

Adrian snorted. "Yeah, not interested in getting all my joints reversed or whatever hex you've got on your bed."

"Hexes," Harry said, cutting into his quiche.

"Your hair's a mess," Jasmine said, leaning over to pat his head.

"What is going on this morning?" he muttered.

"You missed the announcement," Astrid said. "The dementors are gone."

Harry set down his fork. "They what?"

"Yeah, McGonagall said Dumbledore went to the Ministry to handle it," she said. "It's about time."

Harry nodded, looking around the Great Hall. That explained why things felt less miserable. His friends started talking about the upcoming game that weekend and Harry tuned them out, eating his quiche lorraine. There was Charms first, then double Arithmancy. Lunch. Double Potions...

He avoided looking at the head table and kept eating. It was a really good quiche.

Harry walked into the Potions classroom with a sense of impending doom. It had been a better day than most, perhaps the best of the entire school year. He didn't have to worry about Sirius Black. Peter Pettigrew was in Ministry custody. The dementors were gone, as were the trolls. His brother was safe once again. They could even go back to doing rounds every three days instead of every other. And it was a rare day where he had neither gobstones training nor his patrol.

Overall, things were looking up for Harry Evans.

He settled next to Terence at their usual table, unpacking his potions supplies. His dad was standing at his desk with a bored expression, flipping through papers. Harry hardly got any feedback on his written work, but knew his dad wouldn't give him any marks he hadn't earned. Any supposed favoritism didn't extend to making allowances for subpar work.

"Today you will be brewing the Invigoration Draught," his dad said, glaring at Fred and George Weasley when they snickered. "Anyone who intentionally pricks themselves with a billywig stinger will find themselves floating their way into detention with Mr. Filch. While you should already be familiar with the history of this potion, its uses, and the interactions of its ingredients from your reading, I am not so optimistic as to assume you have retained any of this information." His dad looked at the ceiling, shaking his head. "The first record of the Invigoration Draught, then referred to as the Enlivening Elixir—now the name of a different yet similar potion—is in 1456, brewed by Chrysander of Greifswald..."

Harry dutifully took notes as his dad lectured. It impressed him how easily his dad could reel off facts about potions, though he supposed after teaching for years his dad was more than familiar with the material.

His dad was acting normally, so Harry acted along with him. The Invigoration Draught was not difficult to brew, though it took several hours of continuous work. He did have to stop Terence from upending an entire bottle of honeywater into his cauldron, but other than that the class proceeded smoothly.

As Harry set his completed potion on the desk, his dad muttered, "Stay after class."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, his sense of dread returning. He packed up his things, telling his friends he had a question for Professor Snape and watching them file out with the Gryffindors. The door closed behind the last student, and Harry remained seated at his station.

"My office," his dad said.

Harry nodded, then followed his dad to the office attached to the classroom. It wasn't his dad's main office, and functioned as more of a preparation area and storage for any backstock ingredients.

"Sit," his dad said, moving behind the desk to do the same.

Harry sat down, staring at the floor. He knew his dad would be upset with him. He hadn't strictly lied, but he had done something reckless. He knew his dad hated Sirius Black, and

that protecting a man his dad hated might make his dad...

"Harry, look at me."

Harry bit his lip, then looked up at his dad.

"The Easter holiday is soon," his dad said. "Would you like to return to Cokeworth for the duration?"

Harry gaped at him. "What?"

His dad sighed. "I would like to spend the holiday in Cokeworth with you. It seems I have been...negligent in my role as your father. I would like to remedy this so that, in the future, you do not feel as if you have to shield me from your activities."

"Aren't you mad at me?" Harry asked, wrapping his arms around himself.

"I am frustrated," his dad admitted. "A significant amount of my animosity towards Black has been transferred to the appropriate party. If you had approached me, while my reaction might have been unpleasant, I *am* capable of restraint and would have listened to your explanation."

"Oh," Harry said quietly, looking down again.

"You know I have various tools at my disposal to extract the truth from someone," his dad said. "You did not use legilimency on Black. I assume because you did not wish to reveal that ability?"

Harry nodded.

"There is also Veritaserum," his dad said. "I could have easily verified Black's story. You would have not had to run yourself ragged, as I would have had similarly strong motivation to locate and capture Pettigrew."

"I didn't think," Harry began, trailing off.

"No, you didn't," his dad said. "But you are only fifteen-years-old. Hard as it may be to believe, I was once your age. I too made mistakes. Thankfully, I have left that part of my life behind."

Harry laughed, then covered his mouth. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too, Harry," his dad said. Harry looked up again, surprised. His dad looked sadly back at him. "I'm sorry you did not trust me enough to come to me for help."

"I thought you were going to yell at me," Harry said.

His dad shook his head. "I have discovered that, while often satisfying, yelling is not an effective means of communication. Considering the stress you have been under these past

weeks, I do not wish to compound that. There are things we need to discuss. What happened during your sheltering of Black, Pettigrew..."

His dad closed his eyes for a moment. Harry wondered how much of his actual emotions his dad was suppressing. Harry was himself trying not to think too much about Peter Pettigrew. He wished he had done more than break his nose.

"Those discussions need not happen today," his dad continued. "That being said, do you wish to spend the upcoming holiday at home? I understand if you would prefer to stay at Hogwarts."

"No," Harry said, making a decision. "I'd like to go home."

Monty didn't know why he was being summoned to the headmaster's office. He had never been before, but Percy had fetched him after dinner and was taking him there. Monty didn't know Percy well, only as Ron's older brother, a little pompous and very proud of his prefect status, but Percy had been unusually somber during their walk.

They stopped in front of a rather grotesque gargoyle.

"Pear drop," Percy said, and the gargoyle jumped aside, revealing a spiral staircase.

"Stand still," Percy said, stepping onto the staircase. "It moves."

"Like an escalator?" Monty said.

Percy nodded, and the staircase began spiraling upwards.

"Is it about Sirius Black?" Monty asked. He knew the dementors had gone back to Azkaban, and the trolls had been sacked, but no one knew why. The headmaster had been gone all day. And Professor Lupin was out of sorts, giving them a distracted lecture and rushing out as soon as class ended.

"That is not for me to say," Percy said.

Monty rolled his eyes. Harry probably knew what was going on. Had he used the Marauder's Map to track down Black? The thought made Monty anxious. Black was deranged. What would he do to Harry if he learned...but Monty had seen Harry at breakfast, looking perfectly fine. Harry was too smart to go after Black on his own.

They reached a door with a brass griffin door knocker. Percy knocked, and the door silently opened to reveal the most unusual, the most magical, office Monty had ever seen. All the spinning, smoking, whistling silver instruments distracted him so much he didn't notice who was in the room.

“Thank you, Percy,” the headmaster said. “That will be all.”

Percy nodded, and quickly left the office. Monty frowned after him, then looked around. The headmaster was there, sitting behind his desk, in front of a wall hung with portraits. There was an actual phoenix sleeping on a golden perch. Professor McGonagall stood next to the legendary bird, her expression more fierce than usual. Professor Snape, who looked unhappy as always. And Professor Lupin, who looked sickly.

“Have a seat, Monty,” the headmaster said, nodding to the chair opposite him.

“Was Sirius Black finally caught, sir?” Monty asked, sitting.

Dumbledore smiled at him. “He was, but not in the way you might imagine, which is what we are here to discuss. Among other things.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Do you know why Sirius was in Azkaban?” the headmaster asked.

Monty knew there were things he wasn’t supposed to know. He knew about Occlumency and Legilimency. He hadn’t interacted with the headmaster much, but the old wizard had a knowing atmosphere around him that made Monty suspicious. It could have just been Dumbledore being old, but Monty didn’t want to betray Harry’s trust.

“It says in the *Daily Prophet* that he killed a bunch of muggles,” he said.

“There’s more to it than that,” Dumbledore said. “You see...”

Monty sat silently as Dumbledore explained to him about his parents going into hiding, the Fidelius Charm, the secret-keeper. About Sirius Black being friends with his parents, which Professor Lupin made a weird noise at. About him being Monty’s godfather. Monty tried to look surprised and appropriately horrified by this information. He had no idea why the headmaster was telling him all of this months after Sirius Black had escaped Azkaban. Or why Harry had been the only one to tell him the truth.

“I tell you all of this,” the headmaster said, “because it has recently come to light that Sirius Black is innocent.”

Monty’s jaw dropped. “What?”

“The man he was accused of murdering, Peter Pettigrew, has been in hiding for these past twelve years. He is the one who was the secret-keeper, and he staged his own death to frame Sirius. Last night he was discovered, and is now being questioned by aurors.”

“Sirius Black is innocent,” Monty repeated.

“Yes,” Dumbledore said, smiling at him. “He is currently resting in the hospital wing. He is quite eager to meet you.”

“Me?” Monty asked. Harry’s dad was innocent the whole time? Did Harry know?

“You *are* his godson,” Dumbledore said.

“I...” Monty didn’t know what to say. He had spent months thinking Sirius Black was a deranged murderer who would kill anyone who stood in his way. He had spent months fearing and hating him. And he was innocent? Sirius Black wanted to meet him?

What about Harry? Or had they already? Monty knew it was supposed to be a secret, so he didn’t ask.

“He has been asking after you,” Professor Lupin said, smiling kindly. “It might do him some good to see you.”

Professor Snape scoffed. “Don’t pressure the boy into coddling Black. It’s not Potter’s responsibility.”

Monty turned to Professor Snape, surprised. Snape looked back indifferently. Strange.

“That wasn’t my intention, Severus,” Lupin said.

“Pray tell, what *are* your intentions?” Snape asked, sneering at Lupin. Monty was even more confused.

“Severus, not now,” the headmaster said. He smiled at Monty again. “Would you like to meet your godfather, Monty?”

The door closed behind Potter and McGonagall, who was taking the boy to have a touching reunion with his godfather. Severus was glad to miss it.

Remus Lupin sat in his chair like a man awaiting execution.

“I suppose we must address the oliphant in the room,” Dumbledore said. “Remus, were you aware that Sirius was an animagus?”

Lupin swallowed, then nodded. “They all became animagi after they learned I was a werewolf. We used to explore the grounds together during my transformations.”

“You restrained yourself to roaming the grounds as a transformed werewolf?” Severus said acidly. “How noble of you, Lupin. I’m surprised you didn’t parade down high street in Hogsmeade.”

Lupin sighed. “We went into Hogsmeade too.”

“Incredible,” Severus said. “Headmaster—”

“I am disappointed in you, Remus,” Dumbledore said. Lupin looked as if he had been both expecting and dreading the words. “That you could be so careless with both your own safety and that of others.”

“Disappointed,” Severus scoffed.

Dumbledore shot him a look. “You are not without your own failings, Severus. You would do well to remember that.” He turned back to Lupin. “Why did you not tell us Sirius was an animagus?”

Lupin closed his eyes and made a pained expression. “It would be admitting I betrayed your trust, after everything you’ve done for me. I wasn’t certain Sirius could still do the transformation after so long in Azkaban, as dementors are known to deplete a wizard’s magic. Or that he wasn’t instead using some dark magic learned from Voldemort.”

Severus watched Lupin all but prostrate himself before Dumbledore. He disliked Lupin for his association with James Potter and Sirius Black, but also for how spineless he was. Even as an adult. Was it some twisted bravery to stay loyal to his old friends when he believed a student’s life was at stake? Was Dumbledore’s trust more important than Potter’s life? And what about the trust gained from confessing to his activities while in school?

He knew what Harry would say about what Lupin owed Dumbledore. That he owed him nothing. That letting a werewolf attend Hogwarts was the bare minimum. But what about what Lupin owed the son of his dead friends?

“I will resign,” Lupin said.

“No, I don’t think you will,” Dumbledore said lightly.

Severus gave him a withering look, but the headmaster was focused on Lupin.

“What do you mean?” Lupin asked, looking up.

“Do you believe you can make amends by running away?” Dumbledore asked. “No, I had hoped you would retain your position for many years yet. Indeed, it is part of what motivates our work in breaking the curse on the Defense post.”

“But I’ve done something unforgivable,” Lupin said, baffled.

“Nothing is unforgivable, Remus,” the headmaster said gently. “Not even the curses that bear that name. I am afraid that your condition may need to become public knowledge, particularly if you are called to testify against Peter or for Sirius. In which case, you will need to register with the Ministry.”

Lupin nodded, and after some more banal talk he shuffled out of the room.

“All is forgiven because it worked out in the end?” Severus asked once the door was closed. “You make too many allowances, headmaster. To say what Lupin did is *irresponsible* is a gross understatement.”

“Staffing is my prerogative as headmaster,” Dumbledore said, watching him from over the rims of his glasses. “Do you include yourself in that category, Severus?”

Unable to speak, Severus left the room. He didn’t know what consequences Lupin should face for his inaction, but somehow *nothing* wasn’t enough.

Harry didn’t want to see the version of the Room of Requirement Black had stayed in again, but he did want his wireless back so he made the trip. The lack of security trolls, and having the Marauder’s Map, made it easier to avoid people. He checked the Map before he left the Room, watching as Percy’s dot approached him. Sighing, Harry put the Map away and stepped out of the Room.

“Good evening, Head Boy Weasley,” Harry said, smiling at him.

“Evans,” Percy said, looking past Harry to the door that was disappearing. “You were not in the library.”

“I didn’t feel like reading,” Harry said.

Percy gave him an unimpressed look. “You said you would explain everything.”

“I did say that, didn’t I,” Harry muttered. He looked over his shoulder. “I suppose we could start with this. You walk back and forth three times while thinking of something you need. Maybe a room we could talk in?”

He stepped aside, watching Percy pace in front of the wall. When the door appeared, Percy opened it and immediately shut it again.

“Did it not work?” Harry asked. He’d barely seen anything, just some bookshelves.

Percy’s ears had gone red. “What a fascinating room.”

“Did you want me to try?” Harry asked. “It takes some getting used to.”

“That may be for the best,” Percy said, moving to the side.

Puzzled by Percy’s behavior, Harry thought about the Slytherin common room while he walked. Would the Room replicate the windows showing the Black Lake? Where would it get all the fish?

He opened the door to a compact version of his common room. A crackling fireplace, several plush chairs and couches, a few tables of dark wood, silver fixtures, an emerald carpet. Some paintings of underwater plants and creatures.

“Have you seen any of the other common rooms?” Harry asked, smiling at Percy.

“I have not,” Percy said, looking around.

“I think ours is more subtle than Gryffindor,” Harry said, shutting the door. “Visually less jarring.”

He sat down in an armchair, crossing his legs. Percy hesitated, then sat down across from him.

“It’s nice,” Percy said neutrally.

Green suited Percy better than all that red, but Harry wasn’t going to tell him that. Not when Percy was talking to him again. He didn’t want to drive him away by making him uncomfortable.

“So,” Harry said, settling into his chair. “What do you want to know?”

“It’s perfectly safe, Potter,” Professor McGonagall said in a clipped tone. “Go on in.”

She had taken him to the hospital wing, to a door he had never noticed before. It was like a private room in a muggle hospital. He wasn’t entirely sure about meeting Sirius Black, but he knocked on the door anyway.

“Come in,” a rough voice called out.

Swallowing nervously, Monty opened the door. Since Sirius Black was in the hospital wing, Monty assumed he was injured or ill. But the man was sitting up in bed, looking at him with a hopeful expression. He looked miles away from his picture in the *Daily Prophet*. He was clean, for one, and his long hair was no longer matted. And he looked alive, more like the man who was at his parents’ wedding.

“Hello, Monty,” Sirius Black said. “It’s nice to meet you. I mean, again. I met you when you were a baby.”

McGonagall gave Monty a little push, then shut the door. She had told him that under no circumstances was he to tell anyone about Sirius Black’s presence in the castle.

“Hello,” Monty said. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember that.”

“You *were* a baby,” Black said, patting the chair next to the bed.

“Actually, I do remember something, I think,” he said, carefully sitting down.

Up close, Sirius Black didn’t look much like Harry. His hair was dark, but Harry’s was pure black. And Black’s eyes, despite his name, were a pale silvery blue. Harry’s were as black as his hair. It was a little unnerving.

“I used to dream about a flying motorbike,” Monty said. “That was yours?”

Black grinned at him. “I took you for a ride once. Your mum tore me a new one.”

“Can you tell me about her?” Monty asked hopefully. No one ever talked about his mum.

“Of course,” Sirius said softly. “I’ll tell you everything.”

Taste of Home

Chapter Summary

April 1994

Monty climbed the ladder into the Divination classroom, still queasy from breakfast. It was Fred and George's birthday, and they decided to prank the entire school by adding something weird to the tea. Only the few people who didn't drink tea—Monty had noticed Harry and Percy were both perfectly fine—were spared.

He was looking forward to the Easter holidays, but their professors had given them so much homework Monty doubted he'd have much free time. He would have liked to talk to Sirius some more, but he had only stayed in the hospital wing a few days until it was safe for him to go to St. Mungo's to get better treatment. He had offered to let Monty stay with him for part of the summer holidays, which Monty readily agreed to. Anything to get away from the Dursleys.

Monty liked Sirius. He was nice, and funny, and had tons of stories. But Monty got the impression he wasn't very happy. It made sense since he'd been in Azkaban for years. He had told Monty he had broken out to find Peter Pettigrew, the real traitor. And Pettigrew had been found, though Monty wasn't sure how. Sirius would suddenly stop talking sometimes, as if there were things he wasn't allowed to tell Monty. It was frustrating, but there were things Monty wasn't telling him either.

He was still troubled by Sirius possibly being Harry's dad. He remembered what Harry had told him in the Leaky Cauldron. *He doesn't even know I exist.* Harry had said one of his parents was a Death Eater, but Sirius never worked for Voldemort. Wouldn't Harry be happy about that? He didn't want to say anything until he talked to Harry about it. Maybe once he did all of his homework, he'd have some time. If he didn't end up spending it all on Buckbeak's appeal.

Sighing, Monty sat down with Hermione and Ron at one of the tables. There was a crystal ball in the center.

The classroom was warm and filled with incense drifting out of smoking censers, making Monty drowsy. He didn't think any of it was helpful for Divination, at least not for him, and he was only half listening as Professor Trelawney explained they were starting crystal gazing early as she intended to put it on the exam. Rather, she said the Fates had informed her, though if she had Seen it it was still her choice.

"What an amazing prediction," Hermione said, loud enough for Professor Trelawney to hear. As usual, Professor Trelawney ignored Hermione's skepticism. She had been keeping it up

every class for months.

Monty did pay attention to Professor Trelawney's instructions. Crystal gazing wasn't so much staring as hard as you could into the orb, it required a relaxed and open mind. It was magic.

Monty looked into the swirling smoke inside the orb, slowly clearing his mind as he had learned from his occlumency exercises. Ron kept giggling, and Hermione kept tutting. It was very distracting.

"Have either of you seen anything yet?" he asked, hoping to get them to focus. Or unfocus, as it were.

"Yeah, there's a burn on the table," Ron said. "Someone's spilled their candle."

"This is such a waste of time," Hermione said. "I could be learning something useful!"

Monty took a steadying breath. "If you two aren't going to try, could you at least be quiet?"

Professor Trelawney showed up at their table before either could respond.

"Would anyone like me to help them interpret the shadowy portents within their orb?" she asked.

"No thank you," Monty said, giving her a faint smile. "I'd like some more time to try myself, professor."

Professor Trelawney moved on, her bangles jangling as she checked on her students' progress.

"Honestly, Monty," Hermione said. "You don't take this seriously, do you?"

"I do, actually," Monty said, a little annoyed. "I've asked you before why you haven't dropped this class if you don't like it. It might be a waste of time to you, but it isn't for me."

Hermione stared at him for a moment, then sniffed and started packing her bag. "Fine. I'll go to Professor McGonagall and let her know. I refuse to participate in this farce any longer."

"Wait," Ron said. "I do see something."

Hermione hesitated, narrowing her eyes at Ron.

Monty looked around. Maybe there was another table he could sit at.

"There's going to be loads of fog tonight," Ron finished, grinning at them.

"Brilliant," Monty said flatly, watching Hermione open the trap door and climb down the ladder.

"Why'd you say all that to her?" Ron asked.

“She’s always going after us to do more studying,” Monty said. “I don’t see why she’d be upset when that’s what I’m doing.”

Ron shook his head. “I thought we’d have more of a laugh in this class.”

“No one’s stopping you,” Monty said, turning his attention back to the orb.

The swirling white mist was mesmerizing. Monty was curious how such an object was made. What was the mist made out of? Maybe Harry would know, or that friend of his who liked Divination. Focusing on it helped him ignore Ron’s mutterings, and the rest of the room. It was entrancing, sort of like dancing snakes. Twisting and winding around each other, in constant motion. He still hadn’t told anyone about being a parselmouth. Not that snakes were very interesting to talk to. Why did people think they were evil? They were just snakes.

A snake lunged at him out of the smoke, and Monty scrambled back, falling off his chair, his heart pounding.

“What?” Ron asked, peering over. “You alright, mate?”

Professor Trelawney rushed over. “What is it? Did you see something, dear?”

“I’m not sure,” Monty said nervously.

It didn’t feel like the sort of thing he should tell a room filled with his classmates, and Monty was struggling to come up with some excuse.

“I think I’m still sick from the prank this morning,” he said, righting his chair and sitting back down. “Sorry, professor.”

Professor Trelawney blinked at him through her large glasses, looking disappointed but unsurprised. “Very well. Where is Miss Granger?”

“I think she quit,” Ron said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Monty was grateful for the distraction. People began discussing Professor Trelawney’s prediction that someone would be leaving them around Easter. He knew about self-fulfilling prophecies. That Professor Trelawney had shared that prediction might have influenced Hermione’s behavior.

Looking cautiously into the depths of the smoke-filled orb, Monty wondered if his own experience would be proof enough for Hermione.

Harry waited in the stands for Slytherin and Hufflepuff teams to walk onto the pitch. The last two quidditch games of the year bookended the Easter holidays. No one in Slytherin was happy with their match being second to last. Gryffindor could drag out their game until they

got enough points to win the Quidditch Cup. Astrid swore up and down it was intentional, that it was favoritism.

They were all confident Slytherin would win, but that didn't matter if Gryffindor won too.

Harry was almost finished with his book and knew he wouldn't be forgiven if he read it during the match, so he took it out of his robes and flipped to the last pages.

Cadence climbed shakily off her bike. It had taken hours to peddle from the small airport to the reserve. She had only stopped at the gas station-slash-grocery store-slash-general store, the sole business on the reserve, to ask for directions. She'd got plenty of strange looks. It was the kind of place where everyone knew everyone, and she stood out for being no one.

She left her bike tipped over in the dirt, her legs too weak to even try the rusty kickstand. It didn't matter. She was finally there. Drenched in sweat, caked in dust, every bone and muscle in agony, but she was there.

She looked at the house. Sarah's mom's house. It was one story, long, plain. Snowmobiles sat in the driveway. There were no roads this far north, and the winters were brutal. She could see the lake in the distance, Saskatchewan on the furthest shore. It was as quiet as a held breath.

The door opened.

"I thought I heard someone coming up the drive," Sarah said, walking towards her.

"You cut your hair," she said stupidly.

"What are you doing here, Cadence?" Sarah asked, stopping right in front of her.

"I wanted to see you," she said, still captivated by Sarah's shorn locks. In all the years she had known Sarah, she had never once cut her hair.

"Well, you've seen me," she said. "Go home, Candy."

"No," she said, stepping forward. Sarah stood her ground. "I'm not going to let you push me away again. I don't care if you're a werewolf. I don't care if you accidentally bite me—"

"Lycanthropy kills muggles, Cadence!" Sarah exclaimed. "You don't understand—"

Cadence grabbed her. "No, you don't understand, Sarah. I know you aren't happy. I'm not either. But I'd rather have a shitty life with you than without."

Sarah shook her head, tears trickling down her cheeks, and Cadence felt her heart break a little more. She had come so far, given up so much, and still...

Sarah pulled her into a sweet, searing kiss, soft and warm and perfect.

She tasted like cloudberry. She tasted like salt. She tasted like home.

Jasmine nudged him. "The game's starting."

Harry closed his book, watching the teams rise into the air.

There were almost no students leaving Hogwarts for the Easter holidays. It was a small gathering at the carriages, a collection of mostly fourth- and sixth-years, a few from lower years. Harry was the only fifth-year, and his friends had been surprised at his decision. He was standing next to Luna, who had also decided to go home. He supposed missing her father during Christmas contributed to her decision.

He was glad to be out of robes, too. Lady Madeleine kept trying to climb inside them like she had when she was smaller, and he needed to get her out of the habit or learn spells to better accommodate her.

After petting the thestrals, to the confusion of those around them, they climbed into a carriage, Lady Madeleine jumping in after them. Harry was shocked to find Percy already sitting inside.

"Evans," Percy said, "Lovegood."

"Hello, Percy," Luna said, smiling vaguely at him.

"You aren't staying to study for N.E.W.T.s?" Harry asked, sitting next to Luna. Percy was so tall their knees almost touched.

"I've been studying for N.E.W.T.s since sixth-year," Percy said. "I'm not overly concerned with how I will perform. I have business at the Ministry I must attend to."

Harry nodded, not wanting to question him in front of Luna. He could guess it was regarding Peter Pettigrew. He was worried the aurors would want to question him too.

"What about you?" Percy asked. "You have O.W.L.s coming up, which are arguably more important than N.E.W.T.s. And Lovegood, you have to choose your options."

"I already have," Luna said. "I'm going to do Arithmancy and Ancient Runes."

Harry looked at her in surprise. "Not Care of Magical Creatures?"

"Monty's taking Care," she said.

"That's a rather baroque explanation," he said.

“You take Arithmancy and Ancient Runes,” she said.

Harry smiled at Luna, bemused by her logic. “That’s true. Or you could be like the Head Boy and take everything.”

Luna shook her head. “Daddy says not to meddle with time.”

Harry shrugged, but Percy looked stunned. Luna had all sorts of odd knowledge learned from her dad. That some students got Time-Turners sounded like something he would tell her.

The thestrals shrieked, and the carriage began moving.

“I think Monty will be sad that we are gone,” Luna said.

“He’s going to be busy this holiday,” Harry said. “The third-years get a lot of homework. And he’s still working on Buckbeak’s appeal.”

He glanced at Percy, who had a thoughtful expression.

“I don’t think things are looking good for Buckbeak,” Harry continued. “Lucius Malfoy seems very adamant in punishing Hagrid.”

Percy cleared his throat. “The Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures is a captured institution,” he said. “It serves particular interest groups, of which Hagrid is not a member.”

“You don’t say?” Harry said. “I did wonder why they’ve remained silent on the matter of the basilisk. Though perhaps their Executioner wasn’t equal to the task.”

“Walden Macnair,” Percy said, frowning distastefully.

Harry scoffed. “Figures someone like him would be drawn to killing innocent creatures.”

“You really think there isn’t any hope for Buckbeak?” Luna quietly asked.

“I’m surprised Lucius Malfoy hasn’t already killed Buckbeak himself to get his jollies off,” Harry said offhandedly.

“I don’t believe it is so dire as that,” Percy said, looking sharply at Harry. “There are cases when justice can and does prevail.”

“I suppose,” Harry said. “As I said, there *is* Buckbeak’s appeal in June. Though, if you ask me,” he added, smiling at Luna, “I wouldn’t be opposed to some vigilantism.”

Percy snorted, then looked out of the window.

“I wonder what the fine is for hippogriff thievery?” Harry mused.

“Too much for you to afford,” Percy said, turning back to him. “Please recall you *are* a prefect, Evans.”

Harry was trying very hard to not think of Percy in certain ways, but when Percy looked at him like that...

Luna started giggling, and Harry looked to the side, blushing. If there was anything Cedric was good for, it was helping him forget Percival Septimus Weasley.

It would have been faster for Percy to apparate home, but he took the long journey back to King's Cross with the rest of the students. Unlike at the start and end of the school year, and during Christmas, the train was mostly vacant and thus quiet.

Percy had got his own compartment, not wanting to intrude any further on Harry and Luna. He spent his time in solitude, reading and second guessing himself. He didn't know how he could cope spending hours in a compartment with Harry.

Once at King's Cross, he spotted his mother immediately. She waved and smiled at him. He looked back at the train and saw Harry helping Luna disembark. Luna took his hand and led him over to Xenophilius Lovegood, where they chatted excitedly.

"Is that Harry Evans?" his mother said, having walked over to him. "I didn't realize he was familiar with the Lovegoods! Shall we say hello?"

Without waiting for his response, his mother hurried over to them. Percy followed at a slower pace. He was curious where Harry intended to go for the holidays. Was he staying with the Lovegoods?

"Xenophilius!" his mother called out.

"Good evening, Molly," Mr. Lovegood said, looking away from his daughter to greet her. "Percival. Are your garden gnomes thriving?"

Percy looked at Harry, who had a soft smile as he watched them. Percy felt a pang of pity, which he doubted Harry would appreciate. He imagined it wasn't easy to be a student without a family. To see so many families at King's Cross every year.

Harry saw him looking and his cheeks colored.

"I should be going," Harry said, readjusting his bag. Lady Madeleine's head poked out and she stared at Percy.

"How are you getting home?" Percy boldly asked.

"The Knight Bus," Harry said. "I'm walking to the Leaky Cauldron to catch it."

"At this hour?" his mother said, spinning around.

Harry laughed awkwardly. "Well, it *is* called the Knight Bus."

"Don't be silly," his mother said. "Percy can apparate you, can't you, dear?"

"It's really not an issue," Harry said. "I've taken the Knight Bus plenty of times."

"Nonsense, Percy can take you home," his mother said. "Come along, through the barrier."

Harry smiled and followed Luna and Mr. Lovegood through the barrier. Percy was in a mild state of panic. His mother wanted him to side-along Harry? He didn't even know where Harry lived.

He stepped through the barrier and looked around for Harry. He was standing off to one side, saying goodbye to Luna. Mr. Lovegood took her hand and they went to a shadowed corner, disappearing without a sound. Percy walked over, noticing that Harry had adopted a blank expression.

"I'll meet you at home, dear," his mother called out, walking off to find some secluded place to apparate. He wasn't entirely sure why she had come to meet him at all.

"You don't have to listen to her," Percy said.

"It's not that I mind," Harry said, crossing his arms. "It's just..." Harry sighed.

"I can take you to the Leaky Cauldron," Percy offered.

"That might be for the best," Harry said, watching the cars pass by. He checked his watch. Percy saw he wore a bracelet next to it, one he hadn't noticed before.

"Might as well get it over with," Harry said, walking towards where Mr. Lovegood had apparated. "Have you ever side-alonged someone before?"

"No," Percy admitted, holding out his arm. "But I doubt I will have any issues."

Harry grinned at him, then placed his hand on Percy's arm. "Don't splinch me."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Percy said, twisting on the spot.

They landed just outside of the Leaky Cauldron. The street was dark and quiet, the lone street lamp flickering, moths dancing around it.

Harry didn't let go of him immediately, but squeezed his arm gently.

"Thanks, Perce," he said, moving a step back and taking out his wand. "Have a nice holiday."

The Knight Bus shattered the quiet of the night with its explosive appearance, and Percy watched Harry climb on. He waited until the bus took off again, then apparated home.

Harry clung to his bed on the Knight Bus as it crashed into another bed, rather annoyed. He would have preferred to take the floo to Spinner's End, but he couldn't with Percy there. He had almost asked Percy if he wanted to meet over the holidays, but couldn't think of a way to formulate the question that wouldn't sound so forward.

Lady Madeleine meowed unhappily from inside of his bag.

"I know," Harry said, checking his watch again. He doubted his dad would be pleased with him being late, but Harry knew his dad had met Mrs. Weasley before. She was hard to say no to.

Harry sighed and hung onto his bed, waiting for the ride to end.

Severus frowned over a copy of *Enchantments in Baking*. It had been months since he last cooked, months since he had stepped foot in his kitchen at Spinner's End. Harry seemed content enough to wait, nursing a cup of coffee and dangling a string for Lady Madeleine to play with.

His son had arrived several hours late the night before, which made Severus rather anxious. He was prepared to berate the boy, but Harry had looked exhausted and physically shaken from his journey on the Knight Bus. A journey precipitated by the unwelcome intervention of one Molly Weasley. Had her and her get not caused his son enough harm?

His own parents would have hit the roof. Even drunk, his father had enough spite in him to shout and throw things at people, or throw people at things. Severus doing the opposite of what his parents had had worked well for him. Harry being late was not his fault, and he had arrived safely. That was what was important. The sooner his son learned how to apparate, the better. He needn't rely on Weasleys to tote him around.

Several owls pecked at the window. Severus spelled it open for them, not looking away from the book. Did Harry like bannocks? Saffron buns? Did he even have any sultanas?

"I got a letter from Charity—" Severus stopped reading "—Lament. Someone must have tipped her off about my petition to Professor Sprout. I bet it was Killian."

Severus had a dim memory of Sprout excitedly talking about a round-robin gobstones tournament. The idea appealed to her desire for inclusivity. Why not let everyone play? His Charity was also an avid supporter. Apparently she derived a great deal of amusement from gobstones.

Severus looked up from the book. *His* Charity?

Shaking his head, he kept reading. Crumpets? That was a possibility.

There was a clatter, and a muttered invective. Severus turned around to see Harry spelling coffee from his *Daily Prophet*, a dark expression on his face.

“What’s happened now?” he asked, walking towards the table. He saw what had disturbed his son immediately.

Peter Pettigrew’s repellent visage was splayed across the front page, his eyes darting around, whimpering.

Peter Pettigrew, Servant of You-Know-Who?

Animal Antics

Chapter Summary

April 1994

Breakfast at the Burrow was a somber affair. Percy averted his eyes from the cringing image of Peter Pettigrew on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*.

“At least Skeeter didn’t mention any of the students involved,” his father offered.

Percy nodded, watching the eggs congeal on his plate. “When are we due at the Ministry?”

“We’re meeting with Amelia in about an hour,” his father said. “Nothing to worry about, Percy. It’s only a few questions.”

“I’m not worried,” Percy said, cutting a piece out of his eggs. He’d had Scabbers for years. How much had he heard? How much had he seen? The thoughts filled Percy with disgust and shame.

In the few weeks since Harry had exposed Pettigrew for who he was, Percy had time to consider the magnitude of this violation. A man pretending to be a rat sleeping in his bed, in his room when he got dressed, sleeping in his pockets. It was perverse. It was...

He’d given that man to his youngest brother.

Percy set his fork down.

“May I be excused?”

Percy brushed ashes from his robes as he walked away from the gilded fireplace, his parents flanking him. His mother reached up to dust his shoulders off, muttering about what to do with his hair. It wasn’t anything she hadn’t said before.

The Atrium was thronged with people, most heading to work but some just getting off. The *whoosh* and green flare of fireplaces followed them as they walked towards the bank of lifts.

“We’re meeting with Amelia Bones,” his father reminded him. “Nothing to worry about, Percy.”

“Good morning, Arthur!” someone called out. His father smiled and waved, but didn’t stop to greet his friends and coworkers. He had taken a half day for the occasion.

Percy looked at the Fountain of Magical Brethren as they passed it, the magnificent golden witch and wizard. The goblin, centaur, and house-elf looked at them in adoration while spewing water in glistening arcs. The water coming out of the house-elf’s ears felt symbolic, as if the house-elf was willingly purging himself of any independent thought. Percy wondered if it was some commentary on how witches and wizards viewed these lesser creatures, how the sculptor thought of house-elves, or whether it was unintentional. There was a notable absence of other *magical brethren*. No werewolves or vampires, no hags or harpies, no selkies or merfolk. It was telling.

Percy surrendered his wand for registration, then followed his parents through the golden gates and onto a lift. His mother continued to fuss over him, as if she too wasn’t being summoned as a deponent.

“Level two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement...” an impersonal, feminine voice announced.

They walked down a corridor lined with doors and enchanted windows showing a placid summer sky, wispy clouds drifting across the panes.

“We’re just going to Amelia’s office,” his father said as they passed through the double doors leading into the Auror Headquarters. They walked past cubicles populated by busy aurors, paper airplane memos flapping around them. Percy recognized Kingsley Shacklebolt, who nodded at him then turned to continue removing a wanted poster for Sirius Black. The office was plastered with them, and Black’s portrait had adopted a rather smug look, which was unsettling given how emaciated he was.

At the end of the cubicles was a polished oak door bearing an equally polished brass plaque.

Amelia S. Bones

Head of Department

At his father’s knock, the door opened to reveal an impressive office. The walls were lined with shelves and cabinets, and instead of windows there were various maps with glowing pinpricks. A large desk dominated the room. At it sat Amelia Bones, who stood to greet them. She was a stern woman with short grey hair and a menacing monocle. Next to her was Nymphadora Tonks, holding parchment and quill. She gave Percy a tentative smile.

“Good morning, Arthur,” Madam Bones said, grabbing his father’s hand and shaking it firmly. “Molly, good to see you. And this must be your son Percy.”

Percy shook her hand too. “It’s an honor to meet you, Madam Bones.”

She nodded, then released his hand. "Please have a seat. We only have a few questions for you today."

Percy sat down between his parents. His mother took his hand and gave it a squeeze.

"It'll be alright, dear," she said, smiling kindly at him.

"We will actually be starting with you, Mrs. Weasley," Madam Bones said.

His mother straightened, looking surprised by the change in address.

"Please state your name for the record."

"Molly Weasley," she said.

"When was the first time you encountered Peter Pettigrew, also known as Scabbers the Rat?"

Percy listened as his mother explained how she had first known Pettigrew as a member of the Order of the Phoenix, alongside her brothers Fabian and Gideon Prewett. His father corroborated this.

So Pettigrew had known them. Had known their family. Had known the perfect place to conceal himself, pretending to be a family pet.

Percy sat stiffly in his chair, ignoring his growing nausea and disorientation. He should have eaten. He had taken his litorin before breakfast. It was a poor combination.

"Mr. Weasley," Madam Bones said. It took Percy a moment to realize she was addressing him. "Can you describe the events leading up to the discovery of Pettigrew in the Hogwarts kitchens?"

Percy nodded, hoping his voice would be steady. How Crookshanks had been after Scabbers for months, Scabbers' worsening health, his disappearance, the blood on the bed sheets. Harry suggesting they look for Scabbers. Him telling Harry of his mother first finding Scabbers in their kitchen at home. The rat in a sack of apples.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," Madam Bones said as Tonks scribbled frantically. He was curious why they didn't use a quill charmed to take dictation. Lack of reliability?

"Do you recall anything unusual or unexplained happening around Scabbers?" Madam Bones asked. It seemed like an innocuous question, but it made Percy's skin crawl.

"What do you mean by that?" his mother asked.

Madam Bones gave her a level look. "This is an extraordinary case, Mrs. Weasley. A wizard has been living as your family's pet rat for over a decade. He has had access to your home, to your wands, to your children. I am inclined to have your entire family checked for any memory alteration, a highly invasive process. However, under Veritaserum Pettigrew has sworn he remained a rat for the duration of his subterfuge. We would like to corroborate that."

His mother looked stricken, putting a hand to her mouth. His father looked like he had aged a decade.

“Wasn’t I a good rat?”

“No,” Percy said. “He only acted like a rat. He slept a lot and ate a lot.”

Madam Bones stared at him for a moment, then looked at Tonks, whose hair had turned a sickly greenish hue.

After a few more questions, Madam Bones released them, with a warning that they may be called back in if any new information surfaced. Percy was glad Skeeter’s article that morning hadn’t mentioned him or his family. Inadvertently sheltering a murderer, a follower of You-Know-Who, for years. How would they live that down?

He knew it wasn’t anyone’s fault, not really. No one would have suspected that Scabbers was an animagus. Harry had told him he had got the information from Sirius Black. A man who the Ministry placed in Azkaban without a trial. His family would not have to be going through this latest ordeal if not for that miscarriage of justice.

They silently walked back to the lifts. Percy’s parents had been told about Scabbers being Peter Pettigrew, and it was decided this information would be kept from the rest of the family. That their family’s involvement wouldn’t be made public. Arthur Weasley, department head, letting his children play with a Death Eater disguised as a rat for twelve years? The scandal.

It was being kept from his siblings too. Ron didn’t need to know what Scabbers was. Better to let him think he’d been eaten by Crookshanks. Percy almost wished the cat had been successful.

It would, inevitably, become something they didn’t talk about. Just like Ginny’s possession, and his mother’s squib cousin, and Uncle Bilius.

Percy entered the lift with his parents. It shuddered and began its descent.

“Level three, Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes...”

Two weeks of holidays. Two weeks with just him and his mother at the Burrow, dancing around each other, pretending everything was fine.

He leaned forward and pressed the number four button.

“Percy?” his father asked.

“There is something else I would like to do while we are here,” Percy said.

“Of course, dear,” his mother said hastily, patting his arm. “Anything you’d like.”

Percy nodded as the world fell from under him again.

“Level four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures...”

“I will not be able to spend the entirety of the holiday with you,” Harry’s dad said, setting a plate in front of him. Breakfast had taken a little longer with his dad out of practice. Harry wanted to start learning how to cook with magic too. His dad had a ton of cookbooks.

“I know,” Harry said, wondering why his dad had decided to make crumpets. Not that he was complaining, they looked amazing.

Harry looked at the *Daily Prophet*, where Peter Pettigrew was trying to crawl out of frame.

“Do you think they’ll want me to testify?” he asked.

“The headmaster is hoping to keep any underage students uninvolved,” his dad said. “Sirius Black was the one who identified Pettigrew as a rat animagus, but you were the one to ultimately find him. I would not discount the possibility.”

“Right,” Harry said, reading through the article. There wasn’t much to report. Pettigrew found alive, taken into custody by aurors. No comment from the Ministry. The circumstances of his alleged death. Nothing about Harry, or the Weasleys, or Sirius Black.

“You wanted to talk about what happened with Mr. Black, right?” Harry asked, looking up at his dad.

“Mr. Black,” his dad repeated. Sighing, he asked, “Did he harm you in any way?”

“No,” Harry said. “I wouldn’t have let him.”

His dad looked unimpressed. “It isn’t a matter of *let*.”

“No,” Harry said. “He was...erratic. Dangerous only to people who would get in his way.”

“Which you were,” his dad pointed out.

Harry looked at his plate. “He asked if I was related to mum. Because we have the same name.”

His dad sighed again. “I cannot say I am surprised. Lupin was also curious, as you have told me. “

Harry glanced up and saw his dad looked slightly annoyed. Which meant he was extremely annoyed.

“Black also called me your doppelganger,” he said.

His dad frowned contemplatively. “There is a resemblance, obviously. I imagine it has more to do with your mannerisms. It would be quite a leap of logic for Black to think I have any

children, much less one fathered while we were in school. I doubt he would even believe me capable.”

Harry grimaced, but his dad kept going.

“I was not what you would call *popular*,” his dad said, clearly appalled by having to discuss such base matters. “I spent most of my time with others who eventually became Death Eaters. Your mother was my only true friend. She and I had a very public falling out in our fifth year.”

“What happened?” Harry asked.

His dad didn’t answer immediately, his expression growing distant. “I called her a mudblood.”

Harry winced. He knew his dad had a dark past. Using a word like that wasn’t the worst thing he had done. But to call a friend that and mean it?

“The circumstances which lead up to that are...unpleasant. I was not in my right mind, but, as she later pointed out, I had often used the word to refer to other muggleborns. Your mother being the exception.”

“One of the good ones?” Harry asked.

“I don’t think that way anymore,” his dad said, meeting his eyes. “The mistakes I have made are costlier than most, but I have learned from them. After that particular incident, your mother refused to speak to me. There were few exceptions to this. My mother’s funeral, and —”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t want to know.”

“You being a distant relation of Lily’s is more plausible,” his dad said, as if he hadn’t been dangerously close to referring to the eve of Harry’s conception. “As for you being her son, I highly doubt anyone would draw that conclusion. She concealed her pregnancy while we were in school. I never suspected, and I paid her more attention than most despite losing her friendship. I have done some research into what magic she could have used to do such a thing. Ancient magic, blood magic. I have only found oblique references, as I believe such knowledge was restricted to those to whom it would apply.”

His dad gave him a small smile. “Your mother hid you very well. Even if Black or Lupin does suspect, what proof could they possibly have?”

Harry looked down again. “I told Monty one of my parents was a Death Eater.”

His dad sighed wearily. “During the Death Eater trials, the headmaster gave evidence that I was a spy. It is not public knowledge that I was a Death Eater, nor that I was even accused of being one.”

Harry prodded at his half-eaten crumpet. “I should never have approached him. I should have stayed away.”

“Perhaps,” his dad said. “However, I don’t think your mother would have wished for that.”

He reheated Harry’s crumpet with a wave of his hand, and they finished their breakfast, lost in their own thoughts.

The Easter holidays were going about as well as Monty had expected. With the amount of homework he had, there wasn’t much time for anything else. The news about Peter Pettigrew had caused some stir, but no one really knew what was going on with that. No one seemed to know what it meant to Monty.

He had learned relatively quickly that both Harry and Luna had gone home. Monty would have liked to talk to Harry about the Pettigrew situation. He had known so much about what happened with Sirius Black—what everyone had *thought* happened—that Monty was sure he’d know something about Pettigrew.

All of the homework had everyone in a panic. Seamus loudly complained in the common room, Neville was close to a nervous breakdown, and Hermione looked on death’s door. Dropping Divination had done little to lessen her course load. She had no time to work on Buckbeak’s appeal, so in her stead Ron had taken to it with a vengeance. All the tension about the Firebolt, about Scabbers, had been buried and forgotten. Monty was glad it was over.

Even if Harry and Luna had stuck around, Monty doubted he’d have time for them. When he wasn’t doing homework, Oliver was hounding him to train. He constantly reminded Monty that he couldn’t catch the snitch unless they were more than fifty points up. They would win the match, but lose the Quidditch Cup. Oliver cared more about the match than his N.E.W.T.s.

Curiously, Percy had also gone home for Easter. Monty had asked Ron about it as the rest of the Weasley kids had stayed, but Ron dismissively told him Percy needed to go to the Ministry for something. If anything, Ron was happy Percy wasn’t breathing down everyone’s necks trying to maintain some order in the common room.

There was something else he had wanted to tell Harry, something he found himself reluctant to tell his other friends. Hermione would only mock him, and Monty thought Ron might too. The snake he saw in the crystal ball. He had no idea what it meant. Snakes symbolized all sorts of things. It *felt* like an attack, but Monty wasn’t sure. Would he get bitten by a snake? Someone else? Maybe he could talk the snake out of it.

One morning, a few days into the holiday, Monty got an owl. It wasn’t an owl he recognized, a rather hawk-like owl with prettily striped feathers and spotted wings.

“Who’s that from?” Ron asked. He was trying to eat porridge while reading *The Handbook of Hippogriff Psychology*. Both looked dense.

“Don’t know,” Monty said, untying the scroll from the owl’s leg. The owl nipped him affectionately, stole a piece of bacon, and flew off again. As far as he knew, Harry didn’t have an owl, and his messages were more discreet. Sirius, maybe?

Opening it, Monty smiled when he recognized Luna’s handwriting.

Dear Monty,

I was almost stolen by pixies today. Daddy got me down before they could carry me too far, though I did fall into the creek. It was very cold.

The dirigible plum bushes are beginning to blossom...

As Monty read through Luna’s meandering thoughts, he remembered that he had an owl. Her name was Hedwig, and she was more than capable of carrying letters to people. Still smiling to himself, he tucked Luna’s letter into a pocket and resolved to give his owl something to do over the holiday.

True to his word, Harry’s dad spent a good portion of the holiday back at Hogwarts. With a little over a month until exams his dad had a lot of work, not to mention trying to break the curse on the Defense post. It wasn’t much different from the summer holiday, though, and Harry got to see his dad more than he usually did. He was largely left to his own devices during the day, and for the first time in ages he got to skateboard.

Cokeworth was as grey and dreary as it always was. The few remaining factories shrouded them in smoke that mingled seamlessly with the overcast sky. Harry stuck around Spinner’s End and Spinner’s Circle, not feeling up to interacting with any of his old muggle acquaintances. It was getting harder to relate to the muggle world. Getting muggle news at Hogwarts was no easy task, though he heard it was sometimes a topic of conversation in Muggle Studies.

In the first few days of the holiday Harry saw an article that put him off completely. He had heard it on the wireless too, and it was hard to believe. The suicide of Kurt Cobain.

It was difficult to explain why it affected him so much, when it was someone Harry only knew through his music. Harder to explain why he had burst into tears over a complete stranger. He couldn’t articulate it, not even to his confused dad. It was another shitty thing to happen during a trying year. He felt stupid for crying over it, but it happened anyway.

Skateboarding helped take his mind off things. He couldn’t really think about anything while trying not to crack his head open, or break his wrist again. Cokeworth might have been a crap

town, but at least it had pavement.

Harry was attempting to ollie over some steps, with the vague idea of tackling the moving staircases at Hogwarts at some point, when he spotted a screech owl flying towards him. He pushed himself off the ground and retrieved his skateboard from where it had rolled off, then held out an arm for the owl to land.

“Hello, Hermes,” Harry said, smiling as the owl grabbed onto his arm. “You’ve got something from Percy?”

The owl looked at him like he was an idiot.

“Excuse me for stating the obvious,” Harry said, carefully untying the scroll from his leg. “Have you been told to wait for a response?”

Hermes ruffled his feathers, then shuffled onto Harry’s shoulder.

“You’re too big for that,” Harry said, but Hermes only settled down. “Great. Maddie?”

A nearby bush rustled, and Lady Madeleine trotted out, a dead shrew in her mouth. Hermes’ head swiveled to watch her.

“Is that really necessary?” Harry asked, stepping onto his skateboard. Lady Madeleine hopped on, nearly unbalancing him. It was awkward, but Harry managed to roll them back to Spinner’s End.

Inside his dad’s house, he found the man himself sitting in the living room, reading a book. His dad looked up, from Harry, to the owl, to Lady Madeleine gnawing on her shrew.

“Once again, you have come back with more animals than you left with,” his dad said, nodding towards the kitchen. “At least one of them has the sense to come here directly.”

“Did I get another owl?” Harry asked, carrying Hermes into the kitchen. Inside, he found Hedwig drinking out of a disgruntled Iseult’s water bowl. Hermes took one look at the crowded perch, then flew to sit on the back of a chair. Harry sat down across from him and opened Percy’s letter.

Prefect Evans,

There is a matter of mutual interest I wish to discuss. Would you care to join me for a repast in Diagon Alley? If you are amenable, please avail yourself of Hermes’ services.

Regards,

Head Boy Weasley

Broody

Chapter Summary

April 1994

Monty limped into the Gryffindor changing room, his legs shaking and weak from hours of intense flying. He was still holding onto his Firebolt. He didn't think he could let go. His hand had probably fused to it. He didn't know where Oliver was and he didn't care. He loved flying, but Oliver was managing to take the fun out of it.

He tottered to a bench and fell onto it. After some effort, he was able to peel his hand from the Firebolt. He was glad for his gloves, otherwise Monty doubted he'd have any skin left. He'd take the gloves off later. And he probably needed to see Madam Pomfrey for some healing. He still had to walk up to the castle, then walk up to Gryffindor Tower, then somehow manage to hold a quill to finish his essay on why muggles needed electricity. Monty was taking the bold stance of them *not* needing electricity. It was convenient, but not a necessity. His only source of electricity in the cupboard was a single bulb, which quickly burned out and which Aunt Petunia didn't always bother replacing.

There was a soft *hoot*, and Monty wearily looked up to see Hedwig soaring through the door.

"Hey, girl," Monty rasped. He coughed a little, wishing he had water. Was there a spell for that?

Hedwig hooted again, landing on the bench next to him.

"I don't know how you manage to fly all the time," Monty said, untying the scroll from her leg.

Hedwig blinked slowly at him, looked at his Firebolt, then opened her wings.

"Reckon you aren't flying at one hundred and fifty miles per hour," Monty said. "Unless you want to? That book Harry got me has a few speed charms."

Hedwig clacked her beak.

"Maybe for a special occasion," Monty said, opening the scroll.

Hey,

There isn't much I want to commit to parchment, but I trust that you'll burn this after reading it. These are more things that neither you nor I should know, and things I've been specifically told not to share.

To answer your first question, my holiday is going well. I haven't been doing much besides not being at school, and when you read the next bit I think you'll understand why I wanted a break.

Monty forgot the pain of his hours of quidditch practice as he read with mounting astonishment the circumstances around Peter Pettigrew's arrest. It was the Marauder's Map that had tipped Harry off. He had broken into Filch's office to find who it was confiscated from, had a theory that Sirius Black was an animagus and that he wasn't actually after Monty—they'd met him in Diagon Alley!—literally running into Sirius right after he had slashed Ron's bed curtains. Hiding him in the Room of Requirement for weeks. Learning Scabbers was actually Peter Pettigrew, a rat animagus. Searching for Peter Pettigrew and finding him in the kitchens.

Tossing the parchment onto the ground, Monty fumbled in his robes for his wand then set the incriminating letter on fire. He could tell there were things Harry was leaving out. He'd spent almost two months hiding Sirius? Sirius knew Harry? And Scabbers...Pettigrew. He'd held Scabbers before. He had *fed* Scabbers! What would Ron think?

Monty grimaced. There was no way he'd be telling Ron any of that. Or Hermione, or anyone, and not only because Harry trusted him. It was so weird. It explained why Percy had to go to the Ministry; Scabbers had originally been his rat. He must not have told Ron the real reason, or about Scabbers. Crookshanks was innocent. Ron had been ignorantly protecting the man who had betrayed Monty's parents to Voldemort. He had fed Fudge Flies to the man who had consigned Monty's parents to death.

Monty watched the letter burn until there was nothing left. Hedwig shuffled closer to him, hooting sadly. Monty picked her up and gently hugged her.

What Pettigrew had done was far worse than what Sirius had been accused of.

From the sound of it, Harry had gone to a lot of effort to clear Sirius' name, but Sirius hadn't mentioned him at all.

Sighing, Monty began removing his quidditch gear. It was something he'd have to talk to Harry about in person. He was looking forward to the holiday being over.

Percy stood in front of his family's fireplace, nervously readjusting his tie. Harry had requested that he wear muggle clothes, to what end Percy was uncertain. He did not have

much muggle clothing. Trousers and a jumper didn't seem appropriate for the topic he planned to discuss. It was a professional matter of mutual interest. Muggle professionals wore suits. Therefore, a suit was the proper attire.

He was delaying.

Steeling himself, Percy took a scant handful of floo powder, tossed it into the fire, and stepped into the green flames.

He was bombarded by the clamor of the Leaky Cauldron during lunch. The tables were packed with Ministry employees, people who worked in Diagon Alley, people out for a day's shopping. Witches and wizards, goblins and warlocks, hags and werewolves huddled in dark corners. Where was Harry?

"Percy."

He turned and saw Harry staring at him, his cheeks pink. Percy swallowed, and felt himself blush when he noticed Harry was wearing the shirt Percy had given him for Christmas. It had the image of a green seahorse giving birth. He saw Harry had charmed it so the seahorse was *actively* giving birth, little seahorses issuing from his brood pouch.

Percy immediately felt overdressed.

"You look..." Harry said faintly.

"I had some difficulty determining how to garb myself," Percy said, his embarrassment growing.

"No, you're perfect," Harry said quickly. He closed his eyes, his face reddening. "I mean, you're really...you look very nice."

Percy cleared his throat. "Thank you. Shall we?"

He took a few steps towards the entrance to Diagon Alley, then froze when Harry caught his arm.

"Actually, I thought we could go to a muggle place to eat," Harry said, smiling up at him. He looked down at where he was holding Percy's arm, then let go immediately.

Percy could have melted on the spot.

"That explains your dress code," Percy said, following Harry out of the Leaky Cauldron and onto the streets of muggle London. Even on the cheerless street the Leaky Cauldron resided, it was a lovely spring day. The sky was a rich azure, its canvas broken only by a few pillowy clouds and the occasional bird flying past. A gentle breeze carried the strange smells of the muggle city to him. Old grease and rotting food, urine, exhaust from passing vehicles. Not particularly pleasant scents, but novel. Evidence of long human habitation.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "I thought it would be a nice surprise. I hope it's okay?"

“I find this turn of events agreeable,” Percy said. “Did you have a destination in mind?”

Harry looked him over, frowning slightly. Walking so close to him, Percy was acutely aware that he was at least a foot taller than Harry. How had he never noticed that before?

“You said there was something you wanted to talk about,” Harry said. “We could go to a cafe, and decide what to eat later. Maybe something you haven’t tried before?”

Percy realized he was staring and quickly looked away. “My father has expressed an interest in fast food.”

Harry was silent for a moment, turned away so Percy couldn’t see his expression. “We could do that. It’s cheap, which is good since I’m skint. But it doesn’t narrow our options down much.”

Percy listened carefully as Harry explained the different kinds of fast food. Cheeseburgers, fish and chips, pie shops, sandwich shops, tacos, fried chicken, peri-peri chicken, sushi, hot dogs...He couldn’t identify half of the foods Harry named. Harry laughingly pointed out a bakery called Percy Ingle, but there was nowhere to sit inside so they moved on. Percy was too distracted by Harry’s presence to notice much of what was happening around them, and Harry seemed indifferent to the city bustle. At ease. Percy supposed growing up in the muggle world created a sort of blindness, that the things he found extraordinary were commonplace to Harry and thus not noteworthy.

Eventually, they found a cafe with seating. Percy squinted his eyes against the harsh lighting embedded in the ceiling. Fluorescent lights. The floor was tiled, made of some material he didn’t recognize, and slightly tacky. He did not know if this was typical of muggle dining establishments and made a note to ask Harry at some point. Muggles were queued before the counter, which doubled as a glass display glass. Or perhaps plastic, it was difficult to tell the difference from a distance, and muggle glass was sometimes scratched or clouded. Things were not as easily repaired in the muggle world as everything was done with manual labor.

“I can order for us, if you want,” Harry offered.

“I would like to make an attempt,” Percy said with determination. “Father did give me some muggle money. As I was the one to suggest this meeting, it would only be proper for me to finance it.”

“Just call it money,” Harry said, smiling at him. “Reckon that’s fair, since I paid that one time.”

Percy was glad he had begun learning occlumency, otherwise he feared he might go up in flames. His first chance encounter with Harry in Diagon Alley had not been his best moment. Harry had borne witness to him nearly collapsing in Flourish and Blotts when no one in his family had cared to notice, and quickly helped him get something to eat so he could stabilize his magic.

“What would you like?” he asked, perfectly in control.

After they had got their coffees, Harry led him to one of the free tables, some distance away from the other customers.

“Do they not notice your shirt?” Percy asked, watching as the seahorse had another contraction, releasing several smaller versions of itself.

“Muggle-repelling charm,” Harry said, smiling down at his shirt. “I cast it on anything that would stand out in the muggle world. Most magical people have a hard time with knowing what that is.”

Percy nodded. “Willful ignorance, Professor Burbage calls it. Most want nothing to do with muggles at all. We can’t completely withdraw from their world since we live among them, but many go out of their way to avoid learning anything about it.”

“Ignorance is bliss,” Harry said, smiling faintly. “I never did thank you for your gift. I really appreciate it. And the wireless, too. I lent it to Mr. Black. I think it helped keep him sane.”

“I’m glad to be of service,” Percy said solemnly.

Harry snorted, then took a sip of his coffee. Percy’s eyes were drawn to the motion, noticing the black bracelet again.

He looked up and saw Harry watching him.

“You can see it?” Harry asked.

Percy frowned. “Of course I can. Was it a gift?”

“It was,” Harry said, holding his wrist out for examination. Percy saw that the watch he wore was of simple muggle make, and that it looked quite old. “From Luna. It’s made out of thestral hair.”

Percy pulled back. “I see,” he said flatly. “Hence your surprise.”

“I won’t ask,” Harry assured him. “People always do, and I hate it. It’s like they don’t understand what a personal question it is, or how maybe you don’t want to be reminded.”

“Indeed,” Percy said, taking a sip of his own coffee. It was a relief to not have to limit himself with muggle food. He could have as much coffee as he wanted.

“What was it you wanted to talk about?” Harry asked.

“Right,” Percy said, recalling his purpose for owling Harry. He reached into his jacket. “I was at the Ministry the other day, and made a brief stop at the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.”

He felt around, but the packet he had prepared was missing. He had left it at home. On his desk. In his bedroom.

“Did you forget something?” Harry asked, amused.

“My apologies, it seems I am unprepared,” Percy said, frustrated and embarrassed.

“It’s alright, we’ll just have to schedule another meeting,” Harry said, smiling at him. “You wanted to talk about Buckbeak?”

“Yes,” Percy said. He would get to see Harry again during the holidays. Harry wanted to see him again. He had time to arrange less formal attire. “After our conversation on the way to the Hogwarts Express, I developed an interest in the case. No doubt that was your intention.”

“I was being a bit obvious,” Harry said, grinning at him. “I heard your brother’s been reading hippogriff psychology books.”

Percy grimaced. “I doubt that would sway the Committee. They are well aware of what hippogriffs are like. I have acquired copies of some of the Committee’s past decisions, which I believe will be more persuasive. It is a considerable amount to search through.”

Percy looked around the cafe, realizing that perhaps it was not the best environment to pull out stacks of paper and scrolls of parchment from his jacket pocket. What did muggles carry things around in? Newton Scamander had a suitcase...

“We could go to a library,” Harry suggested. “London’s got a ton of them.”

“I would be very much interested in seeing one,” Percy said, picking up his coffee again. He was getting too excited. The coffee was in a paper cup, with a lid he thought was plastic. It had strange symbols on it he couldn’t decipher. Some sort of muggle runes. It did caution him that the coffee was hot.

“Do you already have a job with the Ministry lined up?” Harry asked, startling him.

“I do,” Percy admitted. “With the Department of International Magical Cooperation.”

“That’s amazing,” Harry said, sounding genuinely impressed.

Percy shook his head. “Penelope’s mother put in a word for me. She’s a member of the ICW. Not to mention my father being the head of a department, and my Great-Aunt Muriel on the Wizengamot.”

“Even without that, I’m sure you’d get by on your own merits,” Harry said, smiling kindly. “How...how are things going with Clearwater?”

Percy’s mind went blank.

“Sorry,” Harry said quickly. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, I have no problem with the question itself,” Percy said. “I am merely unsure how to answer.”

“Not good?” Harry prompted. Hopefully?

Percy looked out of a window, feeling incredibly awkward. Why did Harry want to know? He couldn't possibly...

"I believe our relationship is nearing its end," Percy finally said, deciding he owed Harry the truth. He wasn't sure why it mattered so much. "She wishes to travel after Hogwarts, while I will be entering the Ministry."

Harry's face became curiously blank. "International travel isn't typically a barrier, not for people like us."

"In this case it is," Percy said.

Harry took a sip of his coffee, his eyes growing distant.

"I—" Percy closed his eyes. "That is not the only reason, just a convenient one. I find her tedious, and frequently abhorrent. She is not someone who I am interested in."

Harry's eyes widened. Percy could hardly look at him. The seahorse perpetually in the throes of labor was an appreciated distraction. He wanted to buy Harry more shirts.

"Oh," Harry said. "I'm sorry to hear that. I..." He ran a hand through his hair, a strained expression on his face. Percy watched Harry pull himself back together, and his suspicion grew.

Then Harry smiled at him, and his mind once again went blank.

"Did you read the article about Gringotts curse-breakers?" Harry asked.

Percy nodded dumbly. He had.

Severus arrived home to find his son on the living room floor, holding his toy thestral above him while his half-grown kitten gamboled about.

"What is going on here?" he asked.

"I saw Percy today," Harry said, flexing the toy's wings. "He wore a suit."

Severus looked at his son, who had a moronic expression matched by the foolish behavior of his cat.

Percy Weasley. A seventh-year, almost graduated. The least idiotic Weasley was an acceptable acquaintance for his son. Anything more than that would not end well for the Head Boy.

The Weasleys had plenty of children. They wouldn't miss one or two.

Monty gaped at the picture of Sirius grinning at him from the front page of the *Daily Prophet*. It looked like it had been taken from inside his room at St. Mungo's.

SIRIUS BLACK INNOCENT

THE HARROWING TALE OF ONE MAN'S QUEST FOR JUSTICE

He winced as the Great Hall was thrown into chaos.

"You mean he was innocent this whole time?" Ron demanded. "Then what did he keep breaking in for?"

"Read the article," Hermione suggested, her eyes not leaving the paper.

Monty didn't need to read it, he already knew. It had only been a matter of time after the article about Pettigrew. Pettigrew being alive meant that Sirius hadn't killed him. He knew Harry had been concerned about his own role being exposed, or the Ministry covering up such a huge failure. The *Daily Prophet* wasn't the only source of news, though, and Harry had written that he was reasonably sure *The Quibbler* would be willing to report on it. Luna's dad did seem to thrive on pushing buttons.

"So *that's* why the dementors left," Ron said.

"Isn't this good news, Monty?" Hermione asked, smiling at him. "You can go to Hogsmeade again!"

"Yeah, brilliant," Monty said blandly.

He would perhaps tell them what had really happened with Pettigrew. Eventually. If the *Daily Prophet* didn't expose that too. He'd gone into the *Daily Prophet* archive, but couldn't find any mention of a secret-keeper in the articles about Sirius' arrest. It was good that Sirius was free, and that Pettigrew wasn't, but it didn't make his parents any less dead. Nor all those muggles Pettigrew had killed covering his tracks. Sirius had still been in Azkaban.

At that moment it didn't feel like the right time. It wasn't the sort of thing you chatted about over breakfast. Monty wasn't even sure Hermione and Ron would understand. Most of the time he felt like a normal Hogwarts student, or as much as he could be. He still was the Boy Who Lived, his parents had still been murdered, Voldemort was still out there, biding his time.

They didn't understand loss, not the way he did. Harry did, and Luna, and Neville too, though Monty had never talked to Neville about his parents. Monty had found out about them by accident, while reading about the war. Neville never talked about it. Why would he?

Monty looked at the shy boy. He'd lived with Neville for almost three years, but barely knew him. Did he have any friends? Maybe he'd like to talk about herbology?

"He cleans up nice," Charity said. A wholly unnecessary sentiment.

Severus sneered at the smirking image of Sirius Black. The man would undoubtedly be more insufferable now that his name was being cleared. At least Lupin had left for the holiday, more interested in Black's recovery than the job he held by the skin of his teeth.

"Don't worry," Charity said, winking at him. The woman was deranged. "I've never liked pretty boys."

"I fail to see how that is any of my concern," Severus said, setting his *Daily Prophet* face down. Black ran into another picture and kept waving.

Charity sighed wearily. "I think I've cracked it."

Severus turned to regard her. She smiled saucily back.

"That got your attention, eh?" she said. "The object we're looking for is lost."

Severus turned back to his food, disappointed. "We've already established it's missing."

Charity shook her head. "That's different. And if you weren't so distracted by a certain playboy you'd see the distinction is important."

"It's functionally equivalent," Severus said tartly. *Playboy*. As if he cared. "Searching the castle for a missing thing and searching for a lost thing."

Charity hummed thoughtfully, and Severus got the impression he was being laughed at. "Either way, it needs to be found. The question now is, where can a lost thing be found?"

Severus snorted, reaching for his coffee. "That sounds like something that preposterous door of Ravenclaw's would ask."

A fork clattered, and Severus turned to look at Charity, who was staring at him in wonder.

"That's it," she whispered, her eyes sparkling.

"You can't possibly think..." he began. But no. It was in the Dark Lord's character, to take something precious and defile it.

“The Lost Diadem of Ravenclaw!”

Next Time

Chapter Summary

April 1994

Harry smiled to himself as Percy looked around the library. It was a far cry from the dusty and cramped library at Hogwarts. Plush red carpets, sunlight streaming through the windows, overhead lighting. Miles and miles of shelving. A card catalog.

“Anyone can come here?” Percy asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “And there are hundreds of others in London. Most towns have one of their own.”

“We don’t have anything like this,” Percy said wonderingly.

Harry was a little disappointed Percy hadn’t worn a suit again. He did have an argyle sweater vest over a dress shirt, and had got a briefcase from somewhere. Harry was not discounting transfiguration. If anyone noticed the improbable amount of paper Percy had stored within, they could always claim he was a magician.

“There *is* the library in Alexandria,” Percy whispered. “But you need to submit a request for access to the Egyptian Ministry. William has one through Gringotts. We were, however, unable to visit during our holiday.”

“Maybe next time,” Harry said, leading him deeper into the towering stacks. He hoped there would be a lot of *next times* with Percy.

“Hello, Harry. Hello, Percy.”

“Hey, Luna,” Harry said, sitting across from her. Percy hesitated for a moment, then sat next to Luna. “How was your holiday?”

Harry hummed along as Luna detailed all of her adventures during the break. Almost getting kidnapped by pixies, catching fresh plimplys for stew, helping her dad with *The Quibbler*.

It was bittersweet going back to Hogwarts. The two weeks of holiday, though a setback in his O.W.L. revision, had been a much needed reprieve. And he had got to see Percy twice. Percy

looked at the muggle world the same way Harry had the magical world. It was something he knew existed, that he had heard about and read about, but didn't seem quite real until he saw it for himself.

They had made some progress in their research for Buckbeak's appeal, though it painted a depressing picture. The Committee's decision making, as it was increasingly apparent, was arbitrary. The Committee's records didn't explicitly state that whoever had the most money, influence, were acquaintances of theirs, or those with whom they wanted to curry favor, would ultimately prevail. But the magical community was small, and Percy was familiar enough with its major players to see the undercurrents.

Luna finished her tale and asked, "How was yours?"

Harry glanced at Percy, who was studiously reading more cases. They couldn't devote too much time to it as exams were only a few weeks away, but Percy was confident they would be able to put a compelling case together.

"It was good," Harry said, stealing a roll of parchment from Percy, who only shook his head and kept reading. "I'm surprised they're going after Hagrid over a hippogriff. A domesticated hippogriff, no less. Malfoy didn't even lose a limb."

Luna smiled at him. "Are you going to help Buckbeak?"

"Arrangements are being made," Harry said loftily. Percy glanced at him over his horn-rimmed glasses, and Harry grinned. He turned back to Luna. "Did you want to help?"

Monty hadn't been sure how to approach Neville. He wasn't even sure how he had become friends with Hermione and Ron. They were around all the time, so it just happened. While Neville was around all the time too, there was a distance between him and everyone else. Monty always hung out with Hermione and Ron, Seamus and Dean with each other, and Lavender and Parvati were best friends in their own Trelawney-centric world.

He vividly remembered what it was like to have no friends. Dudley always chased them away. Literally chased them, to the point where people were afraid to even talk to Monty. Dudley and his friends ensured Monty's isolation. It was painful to remember the times he had awkwardly asked other kids if they wanted to be friends, only for them to sprint away. It was hard to work up the courage to keep trying, and it had never paid off.

That was one thing about being famous, people approached him instead of the other way around. Ron asking to see his scar, Hermione saying she had read all about him. Neville hadn't cared. He had only wanted to find Trevor.

Maybe he didn't have to say anything at all?

By the time dinner came around, Monty had a plan. He would just pretend they had been friends the entire time.

There was another start-of-term feast to welcome back the few students who had gone home for the Easter holiday. He hid in the Room of Requirement until it was nearly time for the feast to begin, walking into the Great Hall to find almost everyone already there. The third-year Gryffindors were all seated together, and there was a spot next to Neville.

“Where have you been?” Hermione demanded.

“Don’t know,” Monty said offhandedly, ignoring the space she made for him. “Budge up, Nev.”

Neville gave him a startled look, then scooted over.

“Can’t believe we finished all that homework,” Monty said. “I thought it would never end.”

“I—I know,” Neville stuttered.

Monty almost mentioned the Hogsmeade visit after the upcoming game, but remembered that Neville had his privilege revoked. He’d have to talk to Harry about that, as he now knew that it was Crookshanks who had stolen the passwords.

Just then, he saw Harry walking into the Great Hall with Luna and Percy. Harry avoided looking at the Gryffindor table. It hurt, but Monty knew he had his reasons. He split off from Luna and Percy and went to sit with his Slytherin friends, while Luna skipped over to the Gryffindor table. Monty was surprised Percy didn’t tell her off for not sitting with the rest of her house, but Monty was glad he didn’t when Luna happily sat on Neville’s other side and started rambling about dirigible plums.

It was a start.

“Why do you look so smug?” Astrid asked as Harry sat next to her.

“Did you get a new boyfriend?” Phoebe asked, holding her struggling frog.

“It’s been two weeks,” Harry said, glancing at the Gryffindor table again. He didn’t know much about Neville Longbottom, other than his issues with his dad’s wand and in Potions, but he seemed like a nice kid and someone who Monty would get along with.

“Besides that, muggles aren’t as accepting of people like me,” Harry added.

Phoebe wilted, and her frog gave a sad croak.

“What did you lot get up to while I was gone?” he asked. He didn’t want to talk about imaginary muggle boyfriends. He’d much rather listen to his friends complain about homework, and disappoint them when he revealed he’d finished his ages ago.

An unfamiliar owl made her way to Harry. She had coal black feathers and piercing orange eyes. She flew towards him on silent wings as he and his friends walked back from Herbology, nursing wounds from the Venomous Tentacula, whose adult teeth were coming in.

“Who’s that from?” Phoebe asked. “I’ve never seen that owl before.”

“I don’t know why anyone expects me to know,” Harry said, holding out an arm for the owl to land on. “It’s not like there’s a directory of owls and who they belong to.”

“That *would* be useful,” Phoebe said thoughtfully.

The owl landed lightly on his arm, and up close Harry immediately recognized her. It was Hedwig, disguised. Why his brother had exchanged one distinctive coloration for another he was unsure, but what seemed obvious to someone who spent time with Hedwig might not to others.

“Thank you,” he said, taking the note from her beak. She nipped him, then launched back into the air. Harry hoped his brother was waiting for her return to take the charm off. He was glad *You and Your Owl* was coming in handy.

Harry stepped away from the prying eyes of his friends to read his note. Maybe there was a charm so only certain people could read things? Harry’s first thought was to restrict it to those blood related, but he would have to conceal that aspect from his brother.

Dear Harry,

Should we start using codenames? Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about Sirius Black. What is your new prefect schedule? Also, Neville is still banned from Hogsmead? Do they not know that he didn’t actually lose the passwords? Could you ask someone?

Oliver is driving me crazy about the match. Would you be upset if I won?

Neville’s on the gobstones team, and he says you are doing something different this year. I know the first round is soon, I hope I can come watch.

Monty

Harry casually set the note on fire, drawing a startled shriek from Phoebe. If there was a way for only him or Monty to read the notes, then he wouldn't have to keep destroying them. Even if it was better to do so, he would have liked something to treasure.

He flicked ash from his fingers and checked his watch. After lunch, they had Potions. He would talk to his dad then and get some things settled.

Severus watched his son pack his potions supplies with agonizing slowness, muttering something to his friends. Urquhart rolled her eyes and marched out of the room, followed by the other Slytherins.

Once the door closed behind the last student, Harry approached his desk.

"I doubt you have a question about O.W.L.s," he said drily.

Harry gave him a slight smile. "No, it's about Neville Longbottom."

"Oh?" Severus said. "What interest do you have in Longbottom?"

"He's Monty's friend," Harry said. "And it wasn't his fault the passwords to Gryffindor Tower were lost. They were stolen by Crookshanks. He shouldn't be punished for that."

Severus sighed. "You're asking me to speak out on behalf of a boy for whom I am his boggart. Moreover, a Gryffindor."

"Just frame it in terms of your hatred for Mr. Black," Harry suggested, smiling mischievously at him. "Not wanting your old school nemesis to get away with something."

Severus closed his eyes. He had the patience to teach Potions to clumsy, obnoxious children. He could indulge his son's frivolous requests. He *had* asked Harry to come to him with any issues he had.

"I will see to it," he said.

Harry beamed at him. "Thanks, dad."

Severus watched his son traipse off to his next lesson. When had he become a pushover?

Monty's mission to befriend Neville Longbottom was bearing fruit, in some areas. Sitting with him during meals, and working on homework in the common room, was easy enough to

accomplish.

“Why are we sitting with Neville?” Ron had asked him their second day back, within earshot of Neville.

“Because I want to,” Monty had said shortly. Had Ron always been so ill-mannered?

Neville wasn’t stupid, of course, and worked up the nerve to ask Monty about his changed behavior. Monty stuck to his plan of acting like nothing was out of the ordinary.

“You don’t have to sit with me,” Neville had quietly said, which carried more meaning than the words themselves. Did Neville think he pitied him?

“We’re friends,” Monty said, leaving no room for argument. He could never imagine doing the same thing with someone like Colin. The boy would faint. Not all of Monty's housemates were inured to his celebrity status.

Working with Neville in class was more challenging. Monty was often crammed between Hermione and Ron, with Neville being the odd one out. Except for in Potions. Monty suspected Harry was behind it.

“Granger, work with Finnigan,” Snape said during their first class of summer term. “Weasley, you’re with Thomas. Potter and Longbottom, up front where I can keep an eye on you.”

Monty, who had been setting up his cauldron next to Ron’s as usual, suppressed a smile as he joined Neville at one of the front tables.

“Sorry you’re stuck with me, Monty,” Neville said miserably.

“This is great,” Monty said, grinning at him. “You know loads about herbology. I bet you know what all the plant ingredients do.”

Neville smiled shyly back.

Harry easily fell back into the routine of school. There were assignments to turn in, lectures to sit through, corridors to patrol. The gobstones tournament was soon, and while he did not have Captain Lament’s fiery passion for the game, he still liked gobstones and strove to inspire his teammates.

However, it wasn’t gobstones that was on everyone’s mind. It was the last quidditch game of the year, and excitement had built into a fever pitch. The school was divided. The Hufflepuffs wanted to win, though they had no shot at the Quidditch Cup, but if they won then Slytherin would get the Cup. The Gryffindors wanted to win, as Oliver Wood would accept nothing less. Slytherins were, for the first time in memory, living or dead, in the awkward position of

supporting Hufflepuff, and for some the even more awkward position of supporting Harry's ex-boyfriend.

Soon enough, the day of the fateful match was upon them. The tension in the Great Hall was suffocating. Astrid looked on the verge of hexing someone, though torn as to who should be the target of her ire. A few Slytherins jeered as the Gryffindor team entered the hall, Monty hidden by a defensive wall of teammates. Malfoy's taunts were easily drowned out by the roar of support from the Gryffindor table.

The Hufflepuff team was met by equal enthusiasm, Cedric smiling broadly at everyone. Captain, seeker, fancied by half of the school. Harry was glad Cedric had been avoiding him. He was glad they didn't share any classes. He had come to understand that, while Cedric was a nice person, a lot of that niceness was superficial and couched in ignorance. *Willful ignorance*, as Percy had put it. And seeing Cedric turn that charming smile of his on Cho Chang, by all accounts a very pretty girl, Harry realized that Cedric was rather shallow.

After a strained breakfast, the teams left the Great Hall, and the rest of the school trickled towards the stadium. Once in the stands, Harry huddled among his anxious friends.

"What do we want to happen?" Jasmine asked.

Astrid snarled.

"We want Gryffindor to win," Cassius translated, "but by less than fifty points."

Jasmine shook her head. "This is ridiculous."

Harry was inclined to agree, but with Astrid frothing at the mouth decided it was best to hold his tongue.

There was one bright spot before the game began. Cedric shook Oliver's hand, then turned to Monty. Monty pretended not to see him.

Harry barely restrained himself from laughing at Cedric being so obviously ignored, especially by his typically friendly brother. There was no way Monty could know why Harry disliked Cedric so much, but it was clear he'd picked up on something.

"What was that about?" Jasmine muttered as the players rose into the air.

"Beats me," Harry said, watching as his brother zipped around the pitch, Cedric struggling to keep up. Monty was a reddish blur. Harry didn't know how he could see anything at the speeds he was flying.

Gryffindor was the better team, that much was obvious. Fred and George weren't as vicious as Lucian and Peregrine, but they weren't afraid of hurting someone. Between trying to match Monty's pace, avoiding bludgers, and captaining his team, Cedric was struggling.

"Come on, Spinnet," Astrid muttered, watching as Alicia Spinnet sped towards the Hufflepuff hoops. The keeper was forced to dodge a bludger, and the quaffle sailed through.

“Thirty to twenty!” Lee Jordan called out, nearly falling out of the commentator’s stand in his enthusiasm.

“I don’t know if I can take this anymore,” Jasmine said, fanning herself.

“It’s a set up,” Astrid growled, glaring at where McGonagall stood next to Lee. “The only reason the last game isn’t being played in June is because she doesn’t want N.E.W.T.s to distract her precious captain.”

One hour passed, and then another. The suspense gradually drained away as the game dragged on. No one could keep screaming for so long.

“What’s that?” Lee Jordan said. “Diggory’s spotted the snitch!”

Astrid seized his arm in a painful grip as they watched Cedric perform a dive Harry knew he couldn’t pull off. He wasn’t a good enough flier. And Monty was gaining on him, the Firebolt proving its extravagant price point. Astrid jostled him as the two seekers grew closer and closer to the fleeing snitch.

Harry didn’t bother hiding his smile when Monty snatched it right from under Cedric’s stupid nose, nearly knocking Cedric off his broom in the process.

“Gryffindor wins!” Lee shouted. “Three hundred ninety to two hundred!”

Lee was drowned out as the Gryffindor stands exploded. The pitch was swarmed as the Gryffindor team landed, victorious. But Astrid was cackling like a madwoman. The Gryffindors weren’t the only ones celebrating.

“It’s not enough!” she screamed, shaking him violently.

“Calm down, calm down,” Harry said. “I get it.”

“We won the cup!” she shouted back.

“I know.”

“Gryffindor wins the game,” Lee said, his voice strained, “but Slytherin wins the Cup.”

Astrid finally released Harry, rallying the Slytherin team. The Slytherin stands emptied as Astrid ran out to meet the headmaster, who stood on the pitch holding the Quidditch Cup. Astrid didn’t seem to care that he was Albus Dumbledore, she only had eyes for that golden cup. She singled out Terence and climbed onto his shoulders, laughing and waving her prize around.

Though amused by her antics, Harry was still worried about how his brother was doing. The Gryffindors were obviously conflicted about their victory. Oliver Wood was openly sobbing. But Monty was smiling, still holding the snitch he had captured.

“Diggory doesn’t look good,” Jasmine said in his ear, nodding towards where the Hufflepuff team was moping.

“He lost his team the game, and he lost Gryffindor the Cup,” Harry said, looking away from Cedric to where his brother was now showing off the snitch to Neville.

“I’m just glad it’s over,” Jasmine said, barely audible over Astrid’s continued screaming.

“Not quite,” Harry said, crossing arms.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “It’s the last match.”

“For quidditch,” Harry said, narrowing his eyes.

“You can’t possibly mean…” Jasmine began, backing slowly away.

“I do,” Harry said gravely. “So begins the era of gobstones.”

There was a party in Gryffindor Tower, though it wasn’t as lively as it might have been had they won the Cup. Monty managed to sneak away some time after midnight, after McGonagall had come to break things up.

Wrapped in his invisibility cloak, Monty hurried through the corridors and found Harry waiting for him outside of the Room of Requirement.

“Congratulations on your win,” Harry said, smiling at him. “Sorry about the Cup, though.”

Monty slid his cloak off. “It’s alright. I just wanted to beat Hufflepuff.”

The chasers on his team had giggled over playing against Cedric Diggory. Monty had only noticed the older boy from his association with Harry. Harry had said he had broken up with Cedric because he didn’t fancy him, but it seemed to Monty that something else had happened. Something bad. Otherwise why would Harry have looked so hurt?

“I think Hufflepuff’s popularity is at an all-time low,” Harry said. He paced in front of the wall, then opened the door to what looked like a small kitchen. There was a table, and on it a tray of tea and biscuits.

Curious, Monty stepped into the room and took a seat. Harry sat down across from him, pouring himself a cup.

“I’ve been meaning to give this back to you,” Harry said, pulling something out of his robes. It was the Marauder’s Map.

“I don’t really need it,” Monty said.

Harry sighed. “Your dad made it. I left that part out of the letter because I thought it was the sort of thing you should hear in person. He was Prongs. His animagus form was a stag.”

Monty's eyes widened, and he took the Map back with renewed appreciation.

"But, what about your dad?" he blurted.

Harry gave him a blank look. "What?"

"You said one of your parents was a Death Eater," Monty said. "And you seemed really worried when Sirius broke out of Azkaban..."

Harry kept staring at him. "Let me get this straight. You think *Sirius Black* is my dad?"

"I guess so?" Monty said, feeling increasingly foolish.

Harry began helplessly laughing, and Monty blushed in embarrassment.

"What was I supposed to think?" he demanded.

"Oh, god," Harry said, wiping his eyes. "I'm sorry, it's not really funny. No, he isn't my dad. He would have still been in Hogwarts, you know?"

"I didn't think about that," Monty mumbled, looking down at the Map. "Then who is?"

"I never said it was my father who was a Death Eater," Harry pointed out. "It's not something I would tell anyone. Not even you. They weren't a good person, Monty. I wish I could tell you more, but I *really* can't."

Monty nodded. Now that his embarrassment was fading, he was feeling let down. If Harry really had been Sirius' son, then...

He shook his head. It was just a fantasy. Only a dream.

A cup of tea was pushed at him, and Monty looked up to see Harry smiling kindly, if a bit sadly.

"Is Neville allowed to go to Hogsmeade tomorrow?" Harry asked.

Monty brightened. They might not have been brothers, but they were still friends. "Yeah, McGonagall talked to him after the game. And Snape is making us work together in Potions. It's actually really great..."

Great Treasures

Chapter Summary

May 1994

Remus Lupin was savoring his Wolfsbane, as he had done for months. Harry had been tempted to renege on his agreement with his dad as he found it a trial to be in the man's presence. That he knew about the Marauder's Map and the secret passages into the castle, that he knew about Sirius Black being an animagus, that he knew these things and prioritized such old secrets over his brother's life...

Harry did not like Remus Lupin very much.

"How is studying for O.W.L.s going?" Lupin asked.

"Swimmingly," Harry said. Maybe he could spell the potion directly into Lupin's stomach. His dad and Madam Pomfrey could do that. Of course, it might end up in the wrong organ.

"That's good to hear," Lupin said, smiling warmly.

Harry smiled wanly back. He was trying to not act so much like his dad. He didn't want to arouse any further suspicion.

"The gobstones tournament starts tonight," Lupin observed.

Harry glanced at the silver goblet. "It does. I intend for it to be a rout."

"Oh?" Lupin asked. "Who are you playing against?"

"Hufflepuff."

Lupin chuckled. "I heard about you and Cedric."

Harry closed his eyes. "Everyone and their owl has heard about it."

After Hufflepuff's quidditch loss, a new rumor had started. That Cedric was suffering from their break up. Their break up which had occurred in October. As if Harry had actually been doing what Adrian had suggested and *seduced* Cedric in order to undermine his mediocre seeker skills.

"Diggory didn't need any help to find defeat against a superior opponent," Harry said mildly.

Lupin looked at him in surprise. “I never thought I’d hear a Slytherin say the Gryffindor team was better.”

“They’re better than *Hufflepuff*,” Harry said pointedly. “Are you finished, sir? I need to mobilize my forces.”

Lupin chuckled again—a singularly detestable sound—and finished his Wolfsbane. “There you are. My compliments to Severus, as always.”

“I’ll pass along the message,” Harry said evenly, having no intention of doing so. He picked up the silver goblet, checking to make sure it had been drained. “Have a good night, professor.”

Severus looked up from his calculations as Harry entered his office.

“What are you working on?” Harry asked, searching for a clear space to set the silver goblet. Severus moved some papers for him.

“We have a few ideas of what object the curse may be tied to,” he said. “Narrowing down its location is proving impossible, but knowing what it is will help when we commence a more thorough search of the castle.”

“What do you think it is?” Harry asked, taking a seat.

Severus sighed. As improbable as it was, the headmaster had agreed with Charity’s suggestion. “The Lost Diadem of Ravenclaw.”

“One of the founder’s relics?” Harry asked, frowning. “It’s lost.”

Severus gave him a flat look. “I believe that is the point. It further complicates matters. How would the Dark Lord have found such an item when centuries of searching have yielded nothing?”

“People said the same thing about the Chamber of Secrets,” Harry pointed out.

“Yes,” Severus said, his mouth twisting in distaste. “The Dark Lord has made a habit of doing the impossible.”

“And it’s supposed to be in the castle somewhere?” Harry asked.

“Yes, as the curse attaches to someone in the castle,” he said.

Harry had a thoughtful expression, then it immediately cleared. Severus watched his son suspiciously.

“Gobstones starts tonight,” Harry said. “Are you able to come?”

Gobstones. Severus looked around his desk. He was making little progress. It was likely Charity would be at the gobstones game, she could offer another perspective. More importantly, it was his son’s first year as captain.

“I will be there,” he said.

Harry smiled at him, then stood up. “I need to rally the troops.”

He paused when he reached the door, then turned back with a grin.

“By the way,” Harry said, “Monty thought Sirius Black was my dad.”

His son slipped out of his office and quickly shut the door. Severus stared after him.

Sirius Black.

The father of *his* son?

His desk shuddered as he struggled to check how...affronted the thought made him.

Was Potter blind? As if whatever spawn Sirius Black begat upon some unfortunate, deeply disturbed woman would even *approximate* his own child’s brilliance. What a pathetic joke. It was ludicrous. Preposterous. Outlandish.

Sirius Black?

Severus chuckled darkly. It would be a cold day in hell.

The new round-robin tournament increased the number of games played, while the matches remained at six. Slytherin was coming in with seven players, which meant the other house teams had to scramble to find more.

Playing seven gobstones games in a row was nothing to Harry. He’d broken his teeth on gobstones. He had been trained by one of the greatest captains Hogwarts had ever seen, second only to his own grandmother. The sunstones he cradled in his hands whispered the secrets of their birth to him, their formation within the searing pressure of the caliginous depths of the earth, brought forth to the surface in vociferous ebullitions of erupting lava. The sunstones glowed with the magma in which they had been forged.

His foes lay broken and bloodied in his wake. Harry stood before his final opponent, Haruka Endo, a girl whose piercing eyes belied the placid demeanor of her housemates. A serpent and a badger. A battle to the death. Only one of them would walk away.

“Stones, please!” Professor Flitwick quipped.

Harry tipped his gobstones into Flitwick’s waiting palms, his eyes never leaving Haruka’s.

“Jadeite,” he said, watching her add her gobstones to his.

“White jade,” Haruka said, smiling unkindly. “From Itoigawa-Omi. A gift from my mother.”

The mixed gobstones fell from Flitwick’s hands, clattering into the ring.

“Fascinating,” Harry said, kneeling down across from her. The first move went to her.

“I bet you’re really happy with yourself,” Haruka said, lining up her shot.

“About what?” Harry asked.

“Breaking Cedric’s heart,” Haruka said bitterly. “We always knew he was too good for you.”

Harry laughed. “He’s lucky I didn’t break his fucking face.”

Haruka looked up sharply, her shot going wide. “Excuse me?”

“Did I stutter, Endo?” Harry asked. “That’s a point to me, out of bounds.”

Haruka scowled at him. “I knew there was something wrong with you.”

He snorted. “I hardly remember you exist.”

He smiled at Haruka, who was turning an alarming shade of puce. “I was saving this for the final game, but I find myself unwilling to endure your company longer than necessary. You brought this on yourself, Endo.”

Harry leaned forward, his eyes darting around the distribution of gobstones. “Are you familiar with the concept of mutually assured destruction?”

“What are you blathering about, Evans?” Haruka demanded. “First you threaten Cedric, then you—”

Harry closed his eyes, taking a breath. If not for Haruka’s slip, he wouldn’t have dared to use this move.

His eyes snapped open, and with one fatal flick of his thumb his sparkling sunstone bottle-washer shot out, crashing into clusters of gobstones. The gobstones broke against each other in a dizzying blur of white and orange, the rising sun burning through morning fog, ricocheting in a haunting rhapsody that sang his victory. Gobstone after gobstone spiraled out of the ring, showering them in a rainbow of thick, putrid liquids. Haruka shrieked ineffectually, only worsening her own state as she was drenched, again and again. Through slitted eyes Harry watched her crawl off, vomiting.

“What is going on here?” Flitwick cried, running over as the last gobstones rolled out of the ring. Haruka was on her hands and knees, sobbing. The other games came to a halt as everyone turned to see what havoc Harry had wrought. Harry glanced at his dad, who gave him a rare smile.

Harry wiped his face off and licked his lips. It wasn't the best idea to ingest any gobstones liquid, but Harry couldn't help it. It tasted like victory.

“You are insane,” Astrid said while polishing her Quidditch Cup. It should have been in his dad's office, but she had got her hands on it somehow.

It was the day after the slaughter of the Hufflepuff gobstones team. With forty wins and nine losses, Slytherin was sitting pretty. Spirits had been high since they had won the Quidditch Cup. Astrid was the queen of the common room, though Draco Malfoy sneered whenever he caught sight of her.

“I'm a stoner,” Harry said, carefully polishing his gobstones.

Killian, who was studying nearby with some of his fellow fourth-years, made a strangled noise.

“You ruined your robes,” Cassius said. He was revising their revision schedules. Harry didn't understand why, but they were all going a little mad with O.W.L.s on the horizon.

“I've never seen anything more vile in my entire life,” Cassius continued.

“It's the cross I bear,” Harry said solemnly, finishing the last stone. “Aren't you supposed to be in Care right now?”

Astrid shrugged. “Hagrid canceled class. The others went down to the lake.”

“Really?” Harry said. “This close to O.W.L.s?”

Astrid waved her polishing rag around. “Something about that hippogriff of his.”

Harry gingerly placed the gobstone into his case and snapped it shut. “I'm going to the library.”

“Wait,” Cassius said, tearing a strip of parchment and scribbling something down. “I think this is in the Restricted Section, and you're the only one with a pass.”

“You could get one too if you bothered asking,” Harry said, taking the paper. “*The Predictions of Tycho Dodonus?*”

“It's referenced in our text,” Cassius said, turning back to his charts.

“I’ll take a look,” Harry said, tucking the note away. If Percy wasn’t in the library, at least it wouldn’t be a wasted trip.

Percy stared out of the window. The sun was beginning to set.

Even he had a limit to how much continuous studying he could do. At some point it became superfluous, words and concepts sliding off of his mind. He had been juggling twelve courses since third year. He had got through O.W.L.s, had been preparing for N.E.W.T.s since. His thoughts drifted to other things.

Penelope. He needed to end it with her. He had excuses to avoid her. Not wanting to be distracted during studying, which was flimsy at best. Buckbeak’s upcoming appeal, which was more reliable. Dealing with his brothers and sister, which was no longer viable as even Fred and George had begun studying for their O.W.L.s.

He had heard the rumors around school about how Diggory’s failed relationship with Harry was some sort of long con, that Harry had intentionally sabotaged the Hufflepuff’s quidditch captain and star player. It was absurd, yet people believed it.

If he broke up with Penelope immediately before N.E.W.T.s, would any subpar grades she received be blamed on him? There had to be some organic way to separate from her. That sabbatical of hers...

His patience was stretched thin. He eschewed the library, preferring to study in the common room, but he could only hand out so many punishments before they lost all value. He didn’t want to abuse his position as Head Boy, but disruptions in the common room disrupted everyone, not just him. The younger students had the most trouble focusing, especially as the weather grew warmer.

And there was Harry.

He gripped his hair, frustrated. Harry was only fifteen. He still had two years in Hogwarts. Two years to forget him.

Percy straightened, bracing his hands on the table. He needed to get through his N.E.W.T.s. He was soon entering the workforce. He needed to establish himself, support himself. With his salary he could afford his own medication, but he’d have to continue living at the Burrow. It would be trying during the summer, with his siblings running rampant, but during the school year it would just be him and his parents. His mother would like having him around. It would be fine. He’d been working towards this for years.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding.”

Percy's heart stuttered in his throat, and he turned to see Harry smiling at him. He had been caught sitting at Harry's table in the Restricted Section. Why had he even sat there?

"Evans," he said. "Congratulations on your gobstones victory."

"It was inevitable," Harry said, walking towards the table. "I heard there was some news about Buckbeak?"

Percy nodded. Monty had received a note from Hagrid, and Ron had been railing against the injustice of him having studied so much to no avail.

"The appeal is set for the last day of exams," Percy said. "Halfway through N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s. It seems an executioner is being sent as well."

Harry shook his head. "And here I thought the biggest news today was the Tengus losing against the Gargoyles."

Percy straightened his glasses. "This does not have a significant impact on our plan. We will intervene during the appeal and present our findings."

"That's good to know," Harry said. "Are you busy right now?"

"I..." Percy looked around the table. He couldn't remember the last time he had bothered taking a note. "Not currently."

"Would you accompany me somewhere?" Harry asked. "I need to find something that's been lost."

Percy immediately began collecting his books and papers. "Of course. While not necessarily within the purview of Head Boyship, I can certainly assist in such a matter."

"Great," Harry said. "I just need to check out a book, then we can head up."

When he was finished packing his things, Percy met Harry outside of the library and they walked upstairs. There were few people in the corridors, mostly those who had been late to dinner, hurrying from classes to the library to common rooms, studying diligently. Or having everything set up to study and finding themselves staring wistfully out of windows.

"Where are we going?" he asked as they climbed another set of stairs.

"That room I showed you," Harry said. "It'll make sense."

Once they reached the seventh floor corridor, Harry walked in front of the wall opposite the troll tapestry. Percy leaned in to see what room he had summoned. Harry grinned at him, then opened the door.

Percy was dumbstruck.

"How?"

Harry took his arm and pulled him in, shutting the door quickly. “It’s the Room of Lost Things. Where everything lost in the castle goes. Presumably. I think the house-elves use it to store things too.”

“This is remarkable,” Percy said, staring at the stacks of items. Towering piles of... everything.

“It’s one of my bigger secrets,” Harry admitted. “I haven’t pillaged the room. It’s a treasure.”

“I can see that,” Percy said faintly. It was a resource, and technically everything in the room already had an owner if everything was lost. He looked down at Harry, who was watching him with a pleased smile. “What is it that you have lost?”

“Not me,” Harry said. “Something Rowena Ravenclaw lost.”

Percy stared at him. “You cannot possibly mean her diadem?”

Harry smirked at him.

Percy looked around the room. It was massive, most of it blocked by the piles. It didn’t seem like a place where such a precious item would be. “What do you want it for?”

“It’s not for me,” Harry said. “Or anyone, really. I can’t say much since I’m not supposed to know, but it will be going to the headmaster.”

Percy looked at him again. “Why not tell the headmaster you suspect it may be in here?”

Harry sighed. “Because I’m selfish and I don’t want people to know about this room. It’s special.”

Percy felt a flush of warmth. Harry wanted to keep knowledge of the Room of Requirement secret, and yet he had chosen to share it with him.

“All the house-elves know about it, by the way,” Harry said. “Maybe if they thought of them as people and asked for their help...” He shook his head. “Never mind. Want to help me find it?”

“There is some time before curfew,” Percy said, taking out his wand. “Let’s get started.”

All of their games against Ravenclaw were over. It was just down to one. Derek Wilkes against Luna Lovegood. Derek was sweating under the pressure, but Luna had transcended such mortal concerns, smiling at her sole remaining kyanite gobstone. Derek was down to one too. Harry had gifted the first-year his old rutilated quartz set.

“You can do it, Derek,” Tracey whispered. Vince had his eyes closed and was muttering under his breath. Bridget and Ethan were glaring at the rest of the Ravenclaw team. Killian had decided to get some studying in.

“There’s no rush,” Luna said.

Derek scowled at her. “I’ll finish this in one move!”

He braced himself on the ground and took his shot. It was too slow. Luna’s gobstone was hit, and it rolled towards the edge of the ring.

It reached the line.

It teetered, then rolled over.

“Yes!” Derek said, jumping up and pumping his fist while the audience politely clapped. Luna was coated in a layer of pink goo, which she didn’t bother cleaning off before shaking Derek’s hand.

Harry sighed in relief. Ravenclaw were better than Hufflepuff, but not by much. Thirty-three wins to sixteen losses. They were still ahead. Harry was glad their last match was after O.W.L.s. He didn’t need any distractions when he pulverized Gryffindor.

The night before O.W.L.s began, Harry returned to the Room of Requirement alone. Percy had helped him search a few times, but needed to revise for N.E.W.T.s. He couldn’t jeopardize his upcoming position in the Ministry by underperforming. Harry knew his own internship was contingent upon his O.W.L.s, but he wasn’t concerned. He was more than ready to get the exams over with.

He wandered around the Room of Lost Things, frowning in thought. Ravenclaw’s Diadem was old. Harry had thought that, since it was a magical diadem, it would not have aged the same way a muggle diadem would have. He had been looking for something bright and shiny. But what if it wasn’t? The statue of Rowena Ravenclaw was made out of white marble, and the diadem was carved rather thin. Something thin and tarnished?

Harry had tried asking the Room for the diadem flat out, with no result. He knew it had some curse on it, according to his dad, something that made it resistant to being summoned. That it was seemingly resistant to being summoned by Hogwarts itself was unnerving.

Harry was close to giving in and telling his dad about the Room. While he didn’t personally like Lupin, he was a good Defense professor and Harry didn’t want him to get harmed by the curse. It was capable of killing, as it had with Quirrell. At least, Harry hoped the curse had played a role in that.

He rubbed his face. It was getting late, and he needed to go to sleep. Some last minute studying wouldn't hurt either. The first exam was Charms. He would be devastated if he didn't get an O. It was one of his mum's best subjects.

"Mrrmph."

Harry sighed, then turned to see what Lady Madeleine had dug up. Probably another rubber animal.

His jaw dropped when he saw what she held in her mouth.

The door to Severus' office flew open. Harry slammed it shut behind himself.

Severus leapt out of his seat. "What? What happened?"

"Maddie," Harry panted.

The cat jumped onto his desk, and dropped something round, thin, and tarnished in the middle. She sat down, and began purring.

Severus leaned in close. It was an ancient circlet, with tiny words inscribed along it.

Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure

He looked up at his son, who was clutching his side. He must have ran all the way.

"Where did you find this?" he asked.

Harry grinned at him. "Where do lost things go?"

Severus closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. Months of work, and his son and his kitten had found the blasted thing.

How was he going to explain this to the headmaster?

In the matter of Buckbeak the Hippogriff

Chapter Summary

June 1994

The long tables of the Great Hall had been replaced by individual ones. Harry filed in with the other fifth-years, and the seventh-years sitting N.E.W.T.s. O.W.L.s had been built up so much, by both his professors and his friends, and Harry just wanted to get them over with.

Professor McGonagall stood at the far end of the hall, next to an hourglass almost as tall as she was.

Two hours.

Their exams were distributed to them. When McGonagall said they could begin, Harry flipped his over and sighed at the first question.

a) Give the incantation, and b) describe the wand movement required to make objects fly

Harry was tempted to finish as quickly as he could and leave early, but knew he should use the entire time and provide the best responses he could. To his side Astrid was already gouging an answer into her parchment. Cassius was staring out of a window, likely trying to divine the answer in some cloud formation. Terence was sniffing. Harry spotted Percy up front with some other seventh-years, writing lightning quick.

He looked down at his exam paper again, frowning. He scanned all of the questions, calculating. He'd have to be laconic.

Picking up his quill, he began composing an answer.

There are multiple spells which enable objects to imitate flight. These can be broadly categorized as Levitation Charms, Hovering Charms, Mobilization Charms, and Flotation Charms.

Commonly known as the Levitation Charm, Wingardium Leviosa was developed in 1544 by Jarleth Hobart, a British warlock. This claim is frequently contested...

“Two hours,” Harry said. “Thirty questions. That’s four minutes per question on average. How is anyone supposed to cover Cheering Charms in only four minutes?”

“Someone shut him up,” Adrian complained.

“He’s ambitious,” Astrid said, smearing pickle over her bread. The school had provided a simple lunch in consideration of the decreased appetites the test takers had. Bread, butter, pickles and chutneys, sliced meats, boiled eggs.

Harry nibbled on an egg, thinking over the written exam. It had been far easier than he imagined. First and third year charms? He supposed it was meant to be comprehensive, so it made sense. Initially he had thought two hours was too long, and that he’d be done in half the time and sitting around bored. Then he found himself running out of time when trying to expound upon Mending Charms.

When lunch was over, the fifth- and seventh-years were sent to an antechamber to await the practical portion.

Harry watched Phoebe leave with Cedric and two other boys. Ten minutes later, Professor Flitwick returned to call the next group.

“Endo, Haruka. Evans, Henry. Higgs, Terence. Johnson, Angelina.”

“Madam Marchbanks is free, Evans,” Flitwick said, pointing to a stooped, incredibly old witch.

Harry recognized her name as both the Governor of the Wizarding Examinations Authority and as a member of the Wizengamot. He knew she was nearly one hundred and fifty years old. Did witches and wizards never retire? Then again, former Headmaster Dippet was well into his third century before he had stepped down. Harry hoped that when he was that age he was doing something a little more interesting than asking teenagers to make the tableware do acrobatics.

He obediently performed the charms Madam Marchbanks asked of him. Levitating plates through a series of hoops, making a grapefruit spoon do backflips, turning a vole periwinkle blue, growing and shrinking an irritated skink. There was an exciting moment when the rabbit whose fur Terence was attempting to grow instead grew horns and began breathing fire.

“It could have been worse,” Harry said consolingly as they left the Great Hall.

“How?” Terence asked.

“The rabbit could have set something on fire. Actually, I think that would have been better.”

Terence sighed.

“Harry!”

Harry stopped walking, turning to regard Cedric hurrying towards him. Terence looked at him, then turned to scowl at Cedric.

“What does the git want now?” Terence muttered.

“Fuck if I know,” Harry said. “I can handle it. Phoebe’s probably down at the lake.”

“Just hex him and get it over with,” Terence said. He gave Cedric another hard look, then left the entrance hall for the grounds.

Cedric came to stop in front of Harry.

“What do you want?” Harry asked.

“I just wanted to say I’m sorry about the rumors,” Cedric said, looking like a kicked puppy. “I’ve tried to get them to stop.”

“Right,” Harry said flatly. “Just like you tried to get your friends to stop slagging me off last year. You’re unbelievable.”

“I can’t make people not talk,” Cedric said imploringly.

Harry closed his eyes in annoyance. He had to remember that Cedric didn’t know why Harry disliked him so much. This wasn’t the kind of conversation he wanted to have in the middle of the entrance hall. Or at all.

“One problem with you, Cedric,” Harry said, looking at him again, “one of many, is that you’re indecisive. When you are presented with two options, you will always cave to the more popular one. You’ll act how people want you to act. You want to make everyone happy, but that isn’t always possible. Someone ends up getting burned, and in this case that someone is me.”

“Harry—”

“Stay away from me, Cedric,” Harry said, turning to leave the castle. “You’re dead to me.”

Monty was having the best exams of his life. He transfigured a teapot into a tortoise, his Cheering Charm brought Ron out of his brown study. Care of Magical Creatures was a let down, but very easy. With Buckbeak’s appeal so close, Hagrid had reverted to his mood of last autumn and given them flobberworms to keep alive.

Potions was a wild success. Working with Neville, which he had started to do in Herbology as well, made Monty understand the plants they used better. His Confusing Concoction thickened nicely with the powdered sneezewort he added. Professor Snape frowned, sighed, then walked away to find someone he could be properly disappointed in.

His two most interesting exams were Defense Against the Dark Arts and Muggle Studies. Professor Burbage had them do a short test, asking for both magical and muggle answers. *When you are injured, you go to...* and *When someone asks you what school you go to...* She also set up a room with different muggle technologies, tasking them with determining their uses and how to operate them. Needless to say, Monty found it incredibly simple.

Professor Lupin had set up an obstacle course outside for them. Monty easily dealt with the grindylow, redcaps, and hinkypunk, but hesitated when he reached the trunk containing the boggart.

He had no idea what it would be.

Monty climbed down into the trunk. He knew it wouldn't be Sirius anymore. Having actually met his godfather, Monty was a little ashamed of what his boggart had been. He hoped no one told Sirius.

He looked around the darkened trunk, apprehensive but not particularly afraid. What could be worse than someone trying to kill his friends?

Monty shivered. It was freezing inside of the dimly lit trunk. Something was breathing. Someone was screaming, far away.

"Not Monty, not Monty. Please, not Monty!"

A death rattle. Monty turned slowly around, his wand held out, then froze.

"Stand aside, you silly girl!"

It was a dementor, sweeping towards him. Monty could see under its hood. The grey, scabbed skin, the foul stench of its breath, its rotting hands, reaching for him...

"Expecto patronum!" he cried.

Monty squinted against the blinding burst of light, realizing too late that it was a boggart, not actually a dementor, and that he needed an altogether different spell to banish it. But the Patronus Charm was working. He no longer felt cold, could no longer hear the woman—his mum—screaming, and the boggart-dementor was retreating. He could almost make out a shape in the light, but couldn't tell what it was. A corporeal patronus?

Monty heard someone climbing into the trunk, and he let the charm fade away.

"I'm so sorry, Monty," Professor Lupin said, hurrying over to him with a concerned expression. "I should have known your boggart would change."

“It’s alright,” Monty said faintly, watching as the mist the boggart had turned into tried to reform.

Professor Lupin fumbled around his robes and pulled out a bar of chocolate.

“It’s a good thing I’m still in the habit of carrying these around,” Professor Lupin said, breaking off a piece and handing it to Monty. Monty took it, though he didn’t feel like eating anything.

“Did I pass?” he asked.

Professor Lupin smiled at him. “While you didn’t use the correct spell, it was nevertheless effective. Full marks, I think.”

Monty smiled weakly at him, then climbed out of the trunk to watch Hermione and Ron complete the obstacle course. He couldn’t really laugh with Ron about Hermione’s boggart being Professor McGonagall telling her she failed everything. Was the worst possible thing getting a bad grade? How could that compare to a monster consuming your soul?

His mood was further soured when they ran into the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, who had come to Hogwarts to witness Buckbeak’s execution. As they had suspected, the appeal was a mere formality.

After a gloomy lunch, Hermione ran off to gather all their work for Buckbeak while Monty and Ron went to the North Tower for their last exam, Divination.

Professor Trelawney was seeing them all individually. Ron kept checking his watch. Buckbeak’s appeal was at two o’clock, and Monty worried they wouldn’t make it on time. He was sure they’d chosen the time intentionally, when everyone was taking exams. By the time Ron was done, it was half two. Monty climbed up the silver ladder, not entirely sure what to expect.

The room was sweltering and choked with smoke. Monty rubbed his itchy eyes as he wove his way to the table where Professor Trelawney sat. There was a large crystal ball on it.

“Good day, my dear,” she said softly. “If you would kindly gaze into the Orb...”

Monty nodded, trying to empty his mind as he stared into the swirling smoke trapped within. Ron had told him he’d made things up, which Monty didn’t want to do. He knew it was real magic. And he *had* seen something before.

“Well?” Professor Trelawney prompted.

Monty frowned. “Could you give me some more time?”

“Of course, dear,” she said quietly. “Take your time.”

He closed his eyes, deepened his breathing. Trying to clear his mind was like trying to hold sand. The harder he tried, the less he was able to grasp. After a moment, he opened his eyes again, watching the smoke spiral and curl around itself.

In the heart of the crystal ball, in the depths of its smoke, something began to form.

“It’s an eye,” he whispered, watching as it took shape. “Some kind of bird. There’s a beak forming...a hawk? No...”

His eyes widened as he recognized the head of a hippogriff. Its beak open, shrieking in defiance.

“A hippogriff,” he said. “He looks...defensive...”

“My boy,” Professor Trelawney said, breaking his concentration. The proud hippogriff dissolved back into mist. “You may well be seeing the outcome of poor Hagrid’s trouble with the Ministry of Magic!”

Monty sighed, sitting back. “Or something currently happening. The appeal started at two. The vision is gone now.”

Professor Trelawney nodded, scribbling notes. “Well, I think we’ll leave it at that. It’s a little disappointing that you didn’t see more...”

Monty picked up his bag and started for the trap door, wondering at the brevity of the exam. Even if someone like Ron couldn’t see anything in a crystal ball, there were other forms of divination he could do. Why not test for those?

Professor Trelawney made a low, harsh noise. Monty spun around and hurried back. She had gone rigid in her chair, her eyes rolled back, her mouth hanging open.

“The Dark Lord approaches!” she rasped. “Friendless, abandoned, his servants chained, he approaches! He will rise again, greater and more terrible than ever before. The Dark Lord approaches!”

Professor Trelawney’s head fell forward, and after a moment snapped up again. She blinked owlishly at him.

“I’m so sorry, I must have drifted off,” she said, in her usual dreamy voice.

Monty stared at her in shock. He had read about prophecies before. He knew she would have no memory of it. He knew that she wasn’t a fraud.

She had prophesied that Voldemort was coming back.

He had to tell...he had no idea who to tell. Prophecies were dangerous. Even him hearing it changed the future. It changed everything.

“It’s alright,” Monty said faintly. “It would be nice to have some fresh air.”

Professor Trelawney smiled at him, and Monty left the tower deep in thought. It was too big a thing to keep to himself. Who could he trust to tell?

Monty walked back to Gryffindor Tower in a daze. The corridors were alive with people talking and laughing while on their way to the sunny grounds, relieved at exams finally being over. The fifth- and seventh-years still had another week, Monty knew.

He could tell Harry. Harry would probably say to keep it a secret, lest anyone act on it and make things worse. Trying to avoid the consequences of a prophecy could lead to it being fulfilled. But wasn't that what he was doing?

Monty was still deep in thought when he reached the common room. He spotted Hermione and Ron in a corner, huddled over something.

Buckbeak.

Monty hurried over. His vision of Buckbeak...

"What happened?" he asked.

Ron looked up and smiled at him. "You're not going to believe it. I didn't think Percy had it in him!"

Percy strode out of his Defense Against the Dark Arts practical exam, feeling around his robes to make sure he had everything he needed.

"Percy!" Penelope called out.

Had she been waiting around for him?

"My apologies, I have a prior engagement," he said without looking back, taking the steps out of the castle two at a time.

He'd make it up to her later, or more likely not. Percy didn't care. There was a life on the line.

He spotted Harry standing just out of range of the Whomping Willow, watching its branches flail about. Luna was crouched next to him, petting Lady Madeleine.

"You're late," Harry said, smiling at him. "What a rare thing."

"I was among the last called," Percy said, not breaking his stride. Harry joined him, crossing his arms.

"And I among the first," Harry said. "Cornelius Fudge is there."

Percy frowned. "That may be to our advantage."

“Exactly what I was thinking,” Harry said. “There’s only so many fuck ups his administration can take before it falls apart.”

Percy gave him a sharp look at his choice of language, given Luna was present, but Luna hadn’t seemed to have noticed.

“There was someone from the Committee I didn’t recognize,” Harry continued. “Walden Macnair with his axe. And the headmaster.”

Percy nodded, swallowing his nerves down.

“I’m representing *The Quibbler*,” Luna said happily. “Daddy is very interested in creature rights.”

Percy looked down at her and saw she had pinned a handwritten note to her robes. *Quibbler Correspondent*. She had a camera hanging around her neck.

“If this doesn’t work, I’m sure we can find the time to do something else,” Harry said, looking pointedly at his neck.

Percy cleared his throat. “I doubt that will be necessary.”

“I hope not,” Harry said quietly as they approached Hagrid’s hut. There were muted voices speaking within, the dull crunch of bones. Harry stepped forward and knocked firmly on the door.

The voices fell silent, and lumbering steps approached them. The door creaked open, revealing a red-faced Hagrid wearing a suit made from the skin of some wooly creature, and an orange and yellow tie.

“What do you lot want?” he said in a tearful voice. “I’ve got some guests...”

“Who is it, Hagrid?” Percy heard Cornelius Fudge ask.

“Some students,” Hagrid said, looking them over with a frown.

“We are intervenors in the case of Buckbeak the Hippogriff,” Percy declared.

Hagrid blinked at him. “You what?”

“Perhaps you should let them in, Hagrid,” the headmaster said.

Still frowning, Hagrid backed away from the door, allowing them inside. It was a small hut for a man of Hagrid’s stature. Adding in his boarhound Fang, Buckbeak on Hagrid’s bed, the Minister for Magic sweating in his pinstriped cloak, the headmaster in lilac robes decorated with fancy hippogriffs, the ancient Committee member Cladius Selwyn, the mustachioed Executioner Walden Macnair, and three students...it was crowded.

“What is going on here, Dumbledore?” Minister Fudge asked, looking from the three students to the headmaster. “Aren’t they meant to have exams?”

“We’ve finished our exams for the day, Minister,” Harry said politely. “As students of Hogwarts, we have a vested interest in all creatures that call the grounds home.”

“I’m a junior correspondent with *The Quibbler*,” Luna chimed in. She lifted her camera and snapped a picture of Macnair leering at Buckbeak while stroking his axe. “I’m here to report on the case.”

Fudge gave Dumbledore an alarmed look.

“I assure you I had nothing to do with this, Cornelius,” the headmaster said calmly. “The incident with Buckbeak has been a popular topic of conversation among the students.”

“I see,” the Minister said, turning back to the students. “And you three are?”

“Harry Evans,” Harry said.

“Meow.”

“And Lady Madeleine.”

“Luna Lovegood,” Luna said, taking another picture.

“Percy Weasley,” Percy said.

The Minister took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. “Weasley, eh?”

“Yes, Minister,” Percy said. “You might know my father, Arthur Weasley, and my aunt, Muriel Prewett.”

“Of course, of course,” Minister Fudge said, smiling. “You say you are here to intervene?”

“Yes, sir,” Percy said, glancing at the wizened Committee member, Mr. Selwyn. “Is Mr. Hagrid finished presenting his appeal?”

Mr. Selwyn looked at the minister before responding. “Indeed, young man. I was prepared to issue the final verdict, but, ah...”

“Perhaps we should listen to what these three have to say?” the headmaster suggested, sitting down at Hagrid’s table.

“I suppose we must,” Mr. Selwyn said wearily, also taking a seat. “Well, go on.”

“Thank you, sir,” Percy said, pulling a scroll from his robes. “As previously stated, I, Head Boy Percival Septimus Weasley of Gryffindor, along with second-year Luna Pandora Lovegood of Ravenclaw, and prefect Henry Samuel Evans of Slytherin, are here on behalf of the students of Hogwarts in the matter of Buckbeak the Hippogriff. I believe all present are aware of the circumstances leading up to this case.”

“We are,” the headmaster said, smiling at him.

Hagrid, who had been standing in awkward silence, shuffled over to his bed and sat on the edge. Macnair sneered at him and backed away to lean against a wall, still fingering his axe.

Percy opened his scroll, which unraveled to the floor.

“We have found several recent decisions made by the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures,” Percy said, nodding to the sole member present, “which are relevant. First, a decision made in January of 1953. A crup escaped from its enclosure, subsequently mauling a muggle child. The Committee decided on a fifty galleon fine and a written warning to the owners. The ICW was not informed of the incident, which is a violation of Clause 73 of the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy.”

“Is that so,” the minister said faintly.

“In 1962,” Percy continued, “a muggle family’s pig farm in Norfolk was destroyed during a nogtail hunt. A team of Obliviators was sent and replacement pigs provided. In addition to the reconstruction of the farm, this cost the Ministry three hundred and seventy-nine galleons. The Committee fined the hunters one hundred galleons total, and issued a written warning.”

Percy kept reading through the list of cases he and Harry had found. Luna took a few more pictures, mostly of Buckbeak.

“Finally,” he said, “just last year, a hippogriff bit her owner’s guest, causing a superficial injury. The hippogriff in question was worth four thousand galleons. The owner was given a ten galleon fine and a verbal warning.”

Percy tapped the scroll and it rolled up again. He looked at Mr. Selwyn. “These are all decisions made while you were on the Committee, sir.”

“I don’t believe you understand the severity of the situation,” the elderly man said. “A student was injured!”

“If I may,” Harry said, stepping forward with his own parchment. “Madam Pomfrey can be called to testify on the following, as well as Mr. Hagrid’s third year Care of Magical Creatures class, who have been notably absent. Multiple witnesses have stated that Draco Lucius Malfoy intentionally baited Buckbeak the Hippogriff, in retaliation for Fleamont James Potter’s success in approaching him. Malfoy received a superficial wound, and after being escorted to the hospital wing was quickly healed. Despite no evidence to suggest Madam Pomfrey’s healing failed, he insisted on remaining in the hospital wing and wearing an unnecessary sling. He maintained this subterfuge for months, as anyone in my house could tell you, going so far as to abdicate his role as the Slytherin seeker in order to pursue this frivolous matter.”

Harry looked at Minister Fudge.

“I could summon Poppy here,” the headmaster offered.

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Minister Fudge said, glancing at Percy, then Luna. Percy kept his expression neutral, despite his growing anger. He knew his name, and to some extent

Luna's, would be more persuasive than the actual law.

“This whole thing has been overblown,” Minister Fudge said, his eyes darting to Luna's camera again. “All this for a boy getting scratched by a hippogriff? Come now, Cladius. Just give Hagrid a fine and let's be done.”

Mr. Selwyn hesitated, then sighed. “I will grant a stay of execution pending further review.”

Hagrid burst into tears, his sobs rattling the walls.

Dumbledore chuckled, patting Hagrid's knee fondly. “I believe this calls for a drink. Perhaps a brandy?”

Percy looked at Harry, who smiled so warmly he thought his heart might explode.

Luna took a picture to commemorate the moment.

An Axe to Grind

Chapter Summary

June 1994

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Monty checked the Marauder's Map, searching the corridors for Harry's dot. He had spent a few days thinking over the prophecy he had heard. It seemed irresponsible to keep it to himself. As far as he knew, very few people were aware that Voldemort was still alive, or whatever a wraith was. Among those who knew was Harry.

He noticed that Harry often patrolled the seventh floor, presumably because it gave him easy access to the Room of Requirement. He wasn't conceited enough to think it was because it made it easier for Monty to meet with him.

It *was* fun to catch Harry unawares, so he'd left his invisibility cloak behind. Harry had a tendency to cast spells first and ask questions later, so Monty was careful not to startle him too much, and made sure his footsteps were audible.

"I was wondering if you'd show up tonight," Harry said, looking up from the book he was reading. He was sitting on the floor with Lady Madeleine sprawled across his lap. "Did you see the article about Pettigrew?"

"Yeah, I'm glad Sirius' name is finally cleared," Monty said, sitting down across from him.

"The Wizengamot didn't take as long as they usually would with these matters," Harry said. "Only three months."

"If you don't count the twelve years he was in Azkaban," Monty said bitterly.

"I know," Harry said, setting his book down.

"How come they didn't mention about them being animagi?" Monty asked.

"Because it's a flaw in their security," Harry said. "I'm sure it must have come out when they were interrogating Pettigrew. He seems like the kind of person who'd do anything to save his own skin. If it becomes common knowledge that if you're an animagus...well, the right kind of animagus. Mr. Black had to starve himself to get through the bars. But it's a way to escape Azkaban. And it might encourage more people to become illegal animagi."

Lady Madeleine yawned and stretched, blinking sleepily at Monty.

“Being an animagus sounds cool,” Monty said.

“It’s really difficult, and dangerous to try,” Harry cautioned. “That’s why the Ministry monitors it so closely. Makes you wonder how many illegal animagi there actually are. And how many people failed. Sirius would probably be able to help you, if you wanted to learn.”

Monty frowned at the floor. “He says I can’t live with him all summer. I have to go back to the Dursleys.”

“I’m sure he can visit you,” Harry said gently. “You’re not going to be trapped inside all the time, not anymore.”

Monty sighed. “I don’t understand why. Maybe he doesn’t want me to live with him at all.”

“No,” Harry said, taking out his wand. Monty watched quietly as he cast a silencing charm, and a few others Monty didn’t recognize.

“For house-elves,” Harry explained. “No one thinks to guard against them. No one thinks about them at all, really. Anyway, I know why you can’t live with him all summer.”

“Really?” Monty asked, leaning forward.

Harry nodded. “Anyone who knows something about sacrificial magic would understand. It’s not the kind of thing anyone talks about, but it’s a very ancient magic. Dying for someone.”

Harry dropped his head, sighing. “Your mum died for you. That itself isn’t enough, there’s a spell that has to be cast. I bet the headmaster is the one who did it. Basically, if one of your blood relatives accepts you into their home, you are protected from the murderer. So as long as you live with your aunt, Voldemort can’t touch you.”

“Oh,” Monty said quietly. “Why not just tell me that?”

Harry ran a hand through his hair, looking vexed. “I have no idea, Monty. Maybe they think you’re too young. Or maybe they don’t want it to get back to Voldemort, but it’s the sort of thing he’d know about anyway. I think adults think that it’s better to keep kids out of things, or that they’re too young to understand. But it’s really not. What if you accidentally broke the spell?”

Monty sat back. “That’s why she said it was fine since it was my birthday.”

“Who? Your aunt?”

“Yeah, since I left on my birthday before.” Monty frowned. “Actually, it’s been like that since I got my letter.”

Harry smiled at him. “So you’ll definitely be able to leave on your birthday this year. And like I said, since Mr. Black’s a free man, he’ll be allowed to visit you. It might do the Dursleys some good to know he’s looking out for you. Or maybe *you* could visit people, I’m sure your friends would like to have you round.”

Monty nodded, though he wasn't sure if he *could* visit people. The Dursleys might not allow him.

"You helped with Buckbeak?" he asked, deciding to change topics. He didn't like having to think about going back to the Dursleys. Knowing if he wanted to stay safe from Voldemort he had no choice.

"Percy did most of the work," Harry said, bravely poking Lady Madeleine's stomach. "It helped that his aunt is on the Wizengamot. You probably could have used being the Boy Who Lived to sway the Committee."

Monty grimaced.

"I know," Harry said. "The Ministry is horribly corrupt. You can't help being famous, but you can't ignore it forever. You may as well use it to your advantage."

"I wish I wasn't the Boy Who Lived," he said, drawing his knees up. He'd never said that to anyone before. At first it had been dazzling. Learning he was famous, and more importantly that he had money and wouldn't have to worry about it. But it came with the caveat of having dead parents, of having to stay with the Dursleys because the wizard who killed them wanted him dead too. Being watched everywhere he went, people whispering about him all the time.

There were very few people who saw him as Monty first, the Boy Who Lived second. Harry. Luna. Sirius. Professor Lupin. Some people got over it eventually, like Hermione, Ron, and Neville, the rest of the Weasleys, his teammates.

Why hadn't Harry reacted like everyone else? He'd even lied to Malfoy that first time on the train...

"I'm sorry," Harry said quietly. Monty met his eyes. Why did Harry look so sad? "It's not fair. You were only a baby and you were turned into a savior."

"It wasn't even me," Monty said heatedly. "If mum sacrificed her life for me, wasn't it her?"

Harry wrapped his arms around himself, his expression darkening. "I don't know. The only person who would is Voldemort, and I doubt he's up to giving any answers. Anything else is speculation."

Monty shuddered. It was already late at night, but somehow it felt more...foreboding.

"I heard a prophecy," Monty whispered.

Harry's head snapped up. "No."

Monty nodded. "During my Divination final. Professor Trelawney went into this...trance and said something. I wasn't sure if I should tell anyone."

Harry closed his eyes, his brow furrowing. "That you were the one to hear it...what did she say?"

“That the Dark Lord approaches, a few times,” Monty said. “Something about his servants being chained up.”

Harry took one of Lady Madeleine’s paws, pressing the pads gently to make her claws extend. “What day was your exam on?”

“Last Thursday,” Monty said.

“Okay,” Harry said. “Okay. Six, twelve, three, thirteen, thirteen. And it *would* be thirteen, it’s fortuitous for him...”

Harry sighed, then looked up again. “We’ve known, well, some people have known he would come back. Almost everyone thinks he’s dead, except those of us who know better. I don’t think there is anything we can do to stop it.”

“So it doesn’t matter?” Monty asked. “If we tell anyone or not?”

Harry shook his head. “You know prophecies are dangerous, and not only because you might cause to happen what you wish to avoid. People *want* to believe he’s dead. Belief is a powerful thing. It’s been two years since we’ve seen proof of his continued existence, yet the headmaster has kept it quiet. If we told people, if they believed us, some people might appreciate it and prepare themselves. Most would say we were crazy. Others might try to find Voldemort and help him.”

“Death Eaters,” Monty said. “What should we do then? I can’t do *nothing*.”

Harry was quiet for a moment, and Monty was worried he would confirm there really was nothing he could do.

“I’ll think of something,” Harry said, his eyes lighting with determination. “When he comes back, we’ll be ready. I promise.”

Monty smiled, relaxing as Harry began talking rapidly about different kinds of magic and *knowing thine enemy*. Even if, even *when* Voldemort came back, there were people who would stand against him. He wasn’t alone anymore.

Harry drifted through the last week of O.W.L.s, getting by on a mix of coffee, Calming Draughts and sleeping potions. He didn’t want Monty to know how terrified the prophecy made him. Few people considered divination a type of time magic. How could it be anything else? People saw potential future events, the act of prophecy itself shifting events to reach that future. It troubled Harry that his brother was the one to have heard it. It suggested to him that Monty was integral to the Dark Lord’s return. There were so many possibilities of how that could manifest, and it put Harry on edge.

Somehow he found himself across from Lee Jordan for the last gobstones game of the year. Slytherin had already won the tournament, Harry wasn't worried about that. He barely even noticed Lee giving him a hard look, too focused on the clacking of the gobstones in his hand. One last game, one last feast, and they'd all be heading back on the Hogwarts Express.

There was a record-breaking turnout. At least thirty people. His dad was there, with Professor Burbage. The other heads of house, and the headmaster. His friends from Slytherin. Luna. Monty, who was comforting Neville. Percy, who looked worn out from N.E.W.T.s.

He placed his gobstones in Professor Sprout's hands then knelt down. Monty had heard a prophecy that the Dark Lord was approaching. It likely referred to Voldemort, given the reference to chained followers. *Approach* could mean several things. It could mean he was physically nearer, or that the time he would be restored to a body was closer.

He hadn't told his dad yet.

"Are you ready, Evans?" Lee asked.

"You will fall, as the others before you have fallen," Harry said, but his heart wasn't in it.

The Dark Lord was approaching. He didn't know how, or when, but he had to be ready for it. He had to protect his brother, no matter what.

"You're popular this morning," Astrid said, pointing up at two owls flying towards Harry. It was the last day of term. There was just the end-of-year feast that evening, then they'd be back on the train in the morning.

Harry watched the owls indifferently. Killian had probably owled Captain Lament about them getting the gobstones trophy again. Her legacy lived on.

A large, square envelope landed in front of him, joined by a scroll.

Harry frowned at the Ministry of Magic seals on both.

"Evans," Gemma Farley called from down the table. "I heard you got a wireless. Want to bring it out to...are those your O.W.L. results? It's only been a week!"

That got everyone's attention. The school's exam grades had been released that morning, but usually O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. results took several weeks. It seemed like they had expedited it in his case.

Harry looked around the Great Hall, and saw a few others had got similar envelopes, including Percy.

His friends crowded around him.

“Well?” Astrid prompted, prodding him in the side.

Harry picked up the envelope first, carefully opening it.

He stared at his grades.

Astrid started laughing.

“Let me see,” Adrian said, snatching Harry’s grades away. He snorted, then passed the paper to Terence. “Still making us all look bad, Haz.”

“Why break the habit of a lifetime?” Harry said faintly. Adrian rolled his eyes and went back to eating.

“Straight Os!” Astrid crowed, slapping his back. “Mum’ll have kneazles when she hears!”

Harry gave her an alarmed look. “Why would your mum care?”

“You think I don’t brag about my best mate?” Astrid said, clapping his shoulder. “What a year. If they don’t give us the House Cup after this, I’ll riot.”

Harry shook his head, picking up the scroll. He broke the seal and unrolled it.

“What’s that?” Jasmine asked, looking up from her perusal of his grades.

Harry read it over. “They want me in to interview for an internship.”

The table went silent. Astrid’s grip tightened.

“What internship?”

The door to the classroom opened. Percy watched Penelope walk in, her hair falling in perfect golden coils, a faint smile on her lips.

“I can’t believe it’s over,” she said, looking around the room. “Why did you want to meet here? Mother’s invited you to our lodge in Queenstown. The ski season has just opened.”

“Penelope,” he said before she could go further. “There’s something I need to say to you.”

Her eyes widened. “What is it, dear?”

Percy winced. “I won’t be able to accompany you. In fact, I think it’s for the best if we separate. I will be too focused on my career to maintain a romantic relationship. I’m not someone who can give you the attention you deserve.”

“Oh, Percy,” Penelope said, walking towards him. “Is this about money? Father is more than happy—”

“It is not about money,” Percy said stiffly. “I’m sorry, Penelope. It has become clear to me that we want different things, and I cannot in good conscience continue this relationship.”

She stopped walking and gave him an incredulous look.

“*You* are breaking up with *me*?”

“Yes.”

Penelope stared at him for a moment longer.

“Fine,” she said tightly, fumbling around in her robes. She pulled out the golden heart-shaped locket and tore it from her neck. “You were always such a bore, Percy.”

She threw the locket to the ground and spun around, striding back to the door. “And absolutely *terrible* in bed.”

The door slammed shut behind her, and Percy let go of the breath he held. It could have been worse.

After some time, Percy left the classroom, leaving the broken locket behind.

Harry had been escorted into the Forbidden Forest by a ring of seventh-years. It wasn’t a secret that he had a wireless, and that any who touched it would find themselves with either new or missing limbs. Even without that, he was the only one who could get the thing to work.

Once the music was on, Harry was finally released from his duties to mill about. There was some disappointment that the Weird Sisters hadn’t made an appearance, but they were on tour. They had to settle for the Wizarding Wireless Network.

After spending some time being thrown around between Phoebe and Adrian, Harry wandered near the tables borrowed from the Great Hall. They groaned under the weight of the drinks spread out. Butterbeer, daisyroot draught, nettle wine, gillywater, a giant cauldron of pumpkin juice spiked with firewhiskey. Harry watched Astrid, who was draped in a large green banner with a writhing occamy, direct Lucian and Peregrine to reorganize the Gobstones Trophy, House Cup, and Quidditch Cup so the last was more prominent while Killian argued with her. Jasmine was slinking through the crowd, charming everyone’s robes green. Fred and George were defiantly setting off red and gold fireworks. Harry pointed his wand at the dragon that emerged, smirking at the cries of outrage.

“Come on, Percy, it’s our last night at Hogwarts!”

Harry twitched at the familiar words, and he saw a tipsy Oliver Wood pushing a bottle into Percy's hands. Percy glared at him, but Oliver was indifferent to his discomfiture.

Harry picked up a butterbeer and uncorked it

"Heard about Penny giving you the boot," Oliver said, attempting to sling an arm around Percy's shoulders and falling laughably short. "Rotten luck."

"Is that how she's telling it?" Percy muttered, frowning at the bottle in his hand. He set it on the table, then looked into the trees.

"Hey, Wood," Harry said, walking over to them. "I think Johnson's looking for you."

Oliver pulled away from Percy. "Is she?"

Percy narrowed his eyes at Harry. Harry smiled blandly back.

"Something about quidditch, probably," Harry said to Oliver. "Who's the new keeper?"

Oliver's head swiveled around, searching the crowd. "Merlin, I haven't even told her my picks!"

Harry smirked as Oliver ran off into the crowd, calling for Angelina Johnson.

"That was unnecessary," Percy said.

"He was bothering you," Harry replied, taking a sip of his butterbeer. "So, you and Clearwater?"

Percy's frown deepened. "I'd rather not discuss it."

Harry shrugged. What did it matter to him who Percy was with?

"You know, I think the first time I talked to you was at one of these," Harry said, smiling as Terence went flying across the clearing.

"Was it?" Percy asked. "I don't recall."

"It was the year your brother Charlie graduated," Harry said, grinning at him. "I brewed an aging potion."

Harry could almost see the cogs turning in Percy's head.

"You talked about your dad's plug collection," he prompted, raising his eyebrows.

Percy immediately went red.

"You must have thought I was an idiot," Percy said. He looked at the table, as if wishing there was something he could drink.

“No,” Harry said quietly. “I thought you were...” He shook his head, smiling again. “Interesting.”

Percy swallowed. “You were shorter then.”

Harry shrugged. The potion he took every month had helped in that regard. “I was only a second-year, I might’ve botched the potion.”

Percy didn't seem convinced.

There was a peal of drunken laughter, and Harry saw Penelope draped over Robert Hillard, the captain of the Ravenclaw quidditch team. Former captain, now that he had graduated.

Percy spotted them too, his blush deepening.

“Do you want to take a walk?” Harry suggested, setting his mostly empty bottle down. “I bet the thestrals are nearby.”

“A walk would be nice,” Percy said, looking away from Penelope.

Feeling unusually bold, Harry took Percy’s wrist and pulled him deeper into the Forbidden Forest.

They didn’t have to walk far for the sounds of the party to fade away. Trees rose like dark sentinels around them, and the canopy was so dense it was hard to make out the sky. The hush of the forest at night fell over them like a shroud. Harry doubted the thestrals were actually nearby. Most creatures had been driven off by the students’ intrusion.

A silvery glow caught his attention, castle ghosts keeping an eye on things. Given all of their professors were former students, it wasn’t a surprise to Harry that they knew.

“Evans,” Percy said in a strained voice.

Harry looked back at Percy, and realized he was still holding onto him. He let go immediately. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Percy said, rubbing his wrist.

They had reached a small clearing. The starry sky could be seen through a break in the canopy. The cool light of the rising moon shone through, limning this small piece of the world in its mercurial light.

“You can call me ‘Harry’, you know,” he said. “We may be working together in the near future.”

“We will be expected to maintain a professional distance,” Percy said, straightening his glasses.

Harry ran a hand through his hair and leaned against a tree, staring up at the sky. He had no idea what he was thinking, dragging Percy into the woods. Percy had looked so

uncomfortable, first with Oliver then with Penelope. Was he making it worse?

“I’ve got an interview next week,” he said.

“A mere formality,” Percy said. “With O.W.L.s like yours you’re all but guaranteed a position.”

Harry looked back at Percy, slowly smiling. “How do you know about my O.W.L.s? By the way, you got your N.E.W.T.s, right?”

Percy smiled back. Harry was glad he had a tree to support him.

“I did,” Percy said. “Quite satisfactory, if I may say so...”

Severus glowered as more students ran into the Forbidden Forest. There was a distant explosion, and a dragon made of red and gold sparks reared above the trees. After a moment a blast of light hit it, and the dragon shifted into a green and silver occamy.

The headmaster chuckled from behind him. “Come now, Severus. The ghosts have the Forbidden Fête well in hand.”

He turned away from the window, watching as the headmaster added the finishing touches to the runic circle. The office had been cleared of its contents, leaving only the bare floor, Fawkes the phoenix, and the ever watchful portraits.

In the center of the runes lay the diary of Tom Riddle. Lupin eyed it warily, his wand hanging at his side.

“Will you now explain what purpose the diary serves?” Severus asked, stepping to one of the cardinal points.

“All in good time,” the headmaster said.

There was a knock at the door, and it swung open to reveal Charity Burbage with an axe propped over her shoulder.

“Are we having our own party in here?” she asked, looking around. Her eyebrows rose when she noticed the runes. “Huh.”

Dumbledore smiled at her. “Not quite, Charity, not quite. I see you’ve brought that wonderful axe of yours, splendid!”

“It’s not really mine,” Charity said, glancing at Severus. She gave him a small smile. “And you asked me to bring it.”

The headmaster added one final rune, writing it on the diary itself. The room dimmed. The rune was a long line with a short, angled slash at either end. Eiwaz, the yew tree. Light and shadow. Life and death.

Dumbledore stood up, taking out his wand. The Elder Wand. Long used to its presence, Severus didn't react.

"The diadem, Severus," the headmaster said quietly.

Severus removed Ravenclaw's Diadem from his robes, and set it at the point the headmaster indicated. Charity gaped at it. Had he neglected to tell her it had been found?

Dumbledore raised the wand. The runes lit up, dancing with a dark, ominous light.

"Severus, Remus, wands at the ready," he said. "Charity, please destroy the diadem."

"What?" Charity said, dumbfounded.

Dumbledore gave her a piercing look. "I assure you, it is necessary."

Charity looked at Severus. He raised an eyebrow. Was he expected to interpret for the headmaster? She sighed, then hefted the axe.

"On my mark," Dumbledore said. "One, two..."

On *three*, Charity screwed up her face and brought the axe down on the diadem. There was an awful clanging noise as the diadem was cleaved, Charity throwing her weight behind the blow. Terrible, ghostly screams filled the room, and it dimmed further. The only light now was from the runes and the quietly burning phoenix, who sang in counterpoint to the screams. A thick, dark substance oozed out of the diadem. Charity grimaced, then lifted the axe and brought it down again, cracking the stone beneath.

"Remus!" the headmaster snapped.

"Right," Lupin said shakily, lifting his wand. Severus scowled. He was going to lose control. "*Pestis incendium!*"

Violent flames spewed from Lupin's wand, striking the diary. Wolves and dogs, a stag and doe, even a few rats lunged out of the flames, surrounding the diary. Charity used the axe to slap the diadem into the conflagration. The diary's pages were flipping even as they caught fire, its unearthly screams drowning out the diadem's own. Severus had no idea what the items were. This ritual the headmaster had concocted was nothing in the usual course of curse-breaking. It didn't *feel* like they were breaking a curse. It felt like they were committing murder.

Time stretched as Lupin's Fiendfyre melted the diadem and burned the diary to ash. It was agonizingly slow, even as Fawkes sang against the strange defenses of the objects. What was the substance they excreted? Who or what was screaming?

Once the diary and diadem were gone, a growling wolf paced around the runic circle, turning its burning eyes on Lupin. Lupin held his wand with both hands, straining against the force of the spell.

“Severus!” the headmaster cried.

Severus glanced at Charity, who was still holding the axe as if it could cut through the flames. Shaking his head, he pointed his wand at the feral Fiendfyre and helped Lupin dispel it. The headmaster began an eerie chant in a language Severus did not recognize, and for a moment he wished his son and that fish of his were there to translate.

He never wanted his son exposed to such magic.

The runes flashed with a searing light, and Fawkes gave one final cry before bursting into flames. Once the light died down, nothing remained. Just bare stone, the wizards and witch, the portraits, the reborn phoenix.

“What the fuck,” Charity whispered, staring at the pile of ash the phoenix chick was struggling out of.

Lupin sank to the floor, sweating, his hands shaking. Another firework burst outside, this time a roaring lion.

“The curse is broken,” Dumbledore said happily, whirling the Elder Wand around and restoring his office. His desk, chairs, all of his trinkets. Lupin climbed into a seat, his head lolling back.

Charity lifted up the axe to examine its blade. “Huh.”

“Thank you for your assistance this evening,” the headmaster said, sitting down behind his desk. “I do need to speak with Remus about this upcoming year.”

Severus tucked his wand away. It seemed he was getting no explanation that evening. “As always, I remain at your disposal. Burbage, we’re leaving.”

Charity pouted at him, but shuffled out when he opened the door for her.

“Well, that’s one way to spend my birthday,” she said as they rode the spiral steps down.

“It’s your birthday?” Severus asked dumbly.

She grinned at him. “Dirty thirty!”

“No.”

“I won’t say it again if you buy me a pint.”

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. “Fine.”

“Yay!”

Monty reluctantly followed Hermione and Ron through the barrier. Luna had disappeared with her dad, and he had no idea where Harry was. Probably with his own friends. He wilted when he saw Uncle Vernon waiting for him, glaring suspiciously at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

“Monty!”

Monty swung around so fast Hedwig hooted in disapproval.

It was Sirius, grinning at him and looking healthier than ever. Monty hurried towards him, ignoring Ron shouting something about a world cup.

“You got out of St. Mungo’s?” Monty asked, smiling up at him.

“Just in time,” he said, pulling Monty into a hug. “It’s good to see you again, kid. Is that your uncle glaring at us?”

Monty looked over and saw Uncle Vernon doing an amazing impression of a tomato.

“Yeah,” Monty said sourly.

Sirius frowned at him. “I think it’s time I’ve had a little chat with him, don’t you think? By all rights I should have been the one to raise you, but, well...”

“It’s alright,” Monty said. “I understand.”

Sirius smiled at him, then slung his arm across Monty’s shoulders. As they walked to face Uncle Vernon’s spluttered wrath, Monty saw a hooded figure leaning against one of the pillars.

It was Harry, smiling at him.

Monty wanted to run over and say goodbye, but before he could act Harry was hopping on his skateboard, Lady Madeleine running at his side. A station guard shouted after him, but Harry only skated faster, disappearing into the crowd.

Shaking his head, Monty turned back to watch his ex-convict wizard godfather politely introduce himself to a fuming Vernon Dursley. It was already shaping up to be a great summer.

Chapter End Notes

That's the Prisoner of Azkaban

Cursory Interview

Chapter Summary

June 1994

The sky was a solid steel grey above, the pavement cracked and pitted below, as Harry made his way to Spinner's End. He had woken up in the flapping, leathery wings of his giant swooping evil plush as it screamed its way into dawn. It was the first day of the summer holidays and the world was his oyster.

Harry was allergic to shellfish.

He slowed to a stop as he neared an intersection. An ancient car rattled by, wheezing an offensive miasma of black smoke. Harry coughed as the car spluttered on, then continued skating to his dad's house.

The world was his snail.

Snails were still molluscs. He hadn't tried eating one before, and decided that licking garden snails was not worth the risk.

Harry opened the door to his dad's house, still thinking over what animal with a shell he could crack open and find a treasure inside. Turtles?

"Morning," Harry said cheerily as he walked into the kitchen. His dad gave him a droll look, then turned back to the stove.

"I would like to learn how to cook with magic," he said, pulling out his chair. Lady Madeleine was already in it, sleeping.

"Your cat arrived early this morning," his dad said drily. "Presumably after decimating the local wildlife."

"It mustn't have been a legitimate decimation if it only took one night," Harry said, tipping his chair so Lady Madeleine slid onto the floor. Her dark grey fur made her blend in almost perfectly when she slunk across the Cokeworth rooftops, but not so much against furniture.

His dad began placing food on the table. Coffee, toast, eggs. Harry could make those things without magic, it was fairly simple. He suspected doing so with magic was even more so, he just needed to learn the spells.

"Have you any plans for this summer?" his dad asked, sitting down across from him.

“I’ve got an interview at the Ministry later today,” Harry said, taking a few pieces of toast.

There was a profound silence from the other side of the table. Harry looked up and saw his dad watching him with an unreadable expression.

“An interview?”

“For an internship I applied for,” Harry explained, recalling with growing trepidation that he had not told his dad about it.

“When was this?”

“In December,” he said, carefully spreading butter over his toast. Thinking back, the only person who knew, other than Percy, was Monty.

His dad sighed. “In the future, I hope you will share major life events with me.”

“Sorry,” Harry mumbled. He hadn’t meant to keep it from his dad.

A cup of coffee was pushed in front of him.

“You are accustomed to keeping your own counsel,” his dad said neutrally. “However, your actions do affect others.”

Harry grimaced. “I can still help with brewing for Madam Pomfrey.”

“That is neither here nor there,” his dad said. “Your general welfare is of concern to me.”

Harry gave him a tentative smile, then turned to his breakfast.

“There are some things I do need to know,” his dad continued. “Such as where you acquired the diadem.”

Harry didn’t immediately reply. Was there any reason *not* to tell his dad?

“Perhaps this will persuade you,” his dad said. “The diadem was an artifact of the Dark Lord’s. Whatever location you found it in is also known to him.”

Harry’s stomach sank. He hadn’t thought of that.

“Was?” Harry asked.

“It has been destroyed,” his dad said flatly.

Harry nodded, then took a sip of coffee. “It’s like I said, it was in a place where lost things go. It’s called the Room of Requirement, a room that changes based on what you need. One of the rooms is filled with things people have lost in the castle. It’s on the seventh floor, across from the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. The house-elves know about it too.”

His dad was quiet for a moment, and Harry’s guilt increased.

“Thank you,” his dad finally said. “I would also have coveted such a discovery.”

Harry nodded, and went back to his food. He still wasn't sure whether to tell his dad about the prophecy. Choosing not to do something was still making a choice, and Harry didn't know if it was the better or worse one. Or if it mattered at all.

He continued eating his breakfast, turning the dilemma over in his mind.

“What time is your interview?” his dad asked.

Harry checked his watch. “In about an hour.”

“And what are you wearing?”

Harry froze with a fork halfway to his mouth, looking down at his clothes. One of his grandad's old jumpers, trousers, trainers.

“This?” he said hopefully.

His dad only looked at him.

“I need robes,” Harry realized. “Everyday robes.”

He pushed his plate to the side and laid his head on the table. “I give up.”

His dad snorted. “You may borrow a set of mine. If you wear muggle clothes, they will assume you are muggleborn. Being a student gives you some leeway, but as an adult you will be perceived as not wanting to assimilate.” His dad paused, then added, “This does raise a question.”

Harry turned his head to look up at his dad. “What?”

“Why do you wish to intern with the Ministry?”

Harry pressed his face into the table again. “It was Percy's idea. He said I could work for the Department of Mysteries.”

“And this appeals to you?” his dad asked.

Harry shrugged. “It sounded interesting. I could do research and development and get paid for it.”

“True,” his dad said. “I suppose doing scut work for the Ministry will keep you out of trouble this summer. No impromptu kidnappings.”

Harry sat up and scowled. “That was only once.”

His dad raised an eyebrow.

“Twice,” Harry conceded. “But the first time wasn't me. And Mr. Black can look after him.”

“That buffoon can hardly look after himself,” his dad said dismissively. “But I agree that, if there is anything to recommend Black, it is his devotion to James Potter’s son.”

Harry gave his dad a pointed look. “I hope he thinks of Monty as Monty, and not just a small version of his dad.”

His dad hummed, and drank more of his coffee. “Black has been known to have made that mistake before.”

“He’s not the only one,” Harry said. He tried wandlessly reheating his eggs—his dad was good at reheating food with only a wave of his hand—but accidentally set his plate on fire.

Harry grabbed his head. Caught hiding things from his dad, no robes for his interview, a growing concern that a man still being rehabilitated from over a decade in Azkaban might not be the most reliable to ensure the well-being of his brother...

“What happened to the world being my snail?” he said despondently as his dad extinguished his breakfast.

“What nonsense are you muttering about?” his dad asked as an owl crashed into the window.

Harry got out of his seat, nearly tripped over Lady Madeleine, and pushed the window open to recover the dazed owl.

“It’s the *Prophet*,” he said, paying the poor bird and setting him on Iseult’s perch to recover. Harry passed his dad a copy and flipped his own open. The photograph on the front page blinded him with a flash of light. “Bloody hell!”

He rubbed his eyes and fell back into his seat. He squinted at the headline.

IRELAND HEADED FOR THE WORLD CUP

The picture flashed again, and Harry covered it with his plate. “Reckon that game finally ended.”

He vaguely recalled Adrian’s excited yammering about the Ireland national team the same morning O.W.L.s started. Not that anyone had the time to worry about quidditch. He lifted his plate slightly to read the article.

“Three weeks,” he said, shaking his head. “If it takes a team three weeks to win a game, I call that a bad team.”

His dad grumbled, flipping his own paper aggressively open. “I would suggest flooring directly to the Ministry. I imagine, even at this early hour, the Leaky Cauldron will be tumultuous. We will arrange for you to acquire suitable robes another day.”

“Got it,” Harry said, glancing at the window again, wondering how long it would take an owl to fly from Aberdeen to Cokeworth. He just hoped Astrid’s inevitable Howler wouldn’t show up during his interview.

Severus watched his son vanish into the flames, only then realizing Harry had likely never been to the Ministry before.

“Hmm.”

Lady Madeleine prowled into the living room and gave him a reproving look.

“It is fortunate your liege lord revealed where he discovered the diadem,” he said to the cat. “Otherwise I would be presenting you to the headmaster.”

“Meow.”

“Unlike my son, I do not comprehend your utterances,” Severus said, standing.

Lady Madeleine’s tail lashed, and she narrowed her green eyes at him.

“Keep an eye on the house,” he said, walking to the fireplace. “There is something I must retrieve.”

If the cat had any response, it was lost to the crackle of the fire.

Harry stepped out of the fireplace and didn’t let himself marvel at seeing the inside of the seat of his government’s power. There were several critical things one had to do in order to fit in. Looking the part, which he did in a charmed set of his dad’s robes. Wearing his school robes would have worked. Having gained an astounding inch of height over the year, they still fit him well, but he would have stood out as a student. More importantly than looking the part was acting the part. Acting like he knew what he was doing, like he was at ease. Like he belonged. And he did. He was a wizard, he was British, he went to Hogwarts. He *should* have.

It was unfortunate Harry wanted to blend in as there was a considerable amount he wanted to stop and gawk at. The gilded fireplaces, streams of witches and wizards entering and exiting in a panoply of vibrant robes, some wearing hats that would put Carmen Miranda to shame. A squad of aurors trotting by. The ceiling, an arcane shade of blue Harry had never seen before, crawling with golden esoteric symbols he wanted to stop and analyze. He wove

through people carrying wobbly stacks of paper, groggy apparators, growling boxes that propelled themselves, a fluffy poffle of puffskeins cleaning dishes stacked in a cart.

Harry almost hesitated at the large display of wizard supremacy dominating the Atrium, but he pretended he hadn't even noticed the giant golden witch and wizard, the centaur, goblin, and house-elf groveling at their feet. He was tempted to fish around in the water for the coins people had thrown in there, but the sign saying proceeds went to St. Mungo's put him off. People there needed the money more than him, but Harry found it audacious of the Ministry to ask its own employees for donations to fund something it could have on its own.

Harry glanced at the sole cafe, a small stand named Ministry Munchies, where people lined up for coffee and danishes. There was a moment of dissonance when Harry realized things he had once considered luxuries—coffee, pastries—were now things he took for granted, expected on a daily basis.

Frowning slightly, he cut through the stream of Ministry employees walking to the lifts, approaching his security desk. A disheveled wizard in robes the oddest shade of green—hastily charmed, Harry guessed—was grinning at the *Daily Prophet*.

“Good morning,” Harry said. The wizard didn't look up from the *Prophet*. “I'm here for an interview.”

“Step over there,” the wizard said, waving to one side. Harry did, and the wizard produced a long and thin golden rod which he waved around, nearly stabbing Harry in the eye.

“Wand,” the wizard said, sticking his hand out.

Harry dutifully placed his wand into the other wizard's palm, feeling intensely uncomfortable with someone else touching it. The security wizard placed it on a brass balance scale with a single, saddle-shaped dish. It rattled for a few seconds, then a strip of parchment was ejected from a narrow slot at the bottom.

“Eleven inches, pine, phoenix-feather core, been in use five years. Is that correct?”

“It is,” Harry said, curious what would happen if he said it wasn't.

The wizard added the slip of parchment to a brass receipt spike, then handed Harry's wand back.

“State your name and the purpose of your visit,” the security wizard said, turning to what looked like a small coin dispenser.

“Harry Evans. I'm here for an interview.”

The wizard tapped the dispenser with his wand and a square, silver badge tumbled out into the circular tray. *Harry Evans, Interviewee.*

“Stick that on your robes,” the security wizard said, finally looking up from his *Daily Prophet*. “What are you interviewing for?”

“A summer internship,” Harry said, pinning the badge to his robes.

“Level one,” the security wizard said, turning back to his paper.

“Thank you,” Harry said, walking through the golden gates to join the queue for a lift. Harry crossed his arms, feeling a little anxious in the press of people. Once a lift opened up he pushed to the very back of it, glad the floor he was getting off at was at the very top. The Ministry’s method of moving people was both more efficient and less comfortable than Hogwarts. It also awakened barely dormant instincts within Harry, which he nobly resisted as pickpocketing Ministry employees right before an interview was a patently bad idea.

The lift clattered and rumbled as it moved from floor to floor. Harry pressed himself against the back wall, thinking over his current predicament. Not only was the ride not steady, nor quiet, something muggle lifts were generally capable of, but the lift itself was claustrophobic. He could not think of a reason why it couldn’t be larger that wasn’t punitive in nature.

Lilac-colored paper planes flapped above him, interdepartmental memos. It was a clever way of delivering messages within the Ministry as using owls would have been a nightmare. Could he charm a paper plane, or some other object, to carry messages across longer distances? Did the paper planes land in designated areas, or go to individual recipients? Harry watched a few planes exit on level six, the Department of Magical Transportation. The next level was the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Had Percy started working yet?

Harry could borrow his dad’s owl Iseult to send letters, not many people recognized her. He’d had to stop working on Benjy due to Sirius Black and O.W.L.s. He wasn’t sure what his job with the Ministry would entail, but he hoped he’d have free time.

The lift gradually emptied, and by the time it reached level one, Minister for Magic and Support Staff, Harry and some flapping memos were the only ones left. He took a deep breath as the lift shuddered to halt, then walked through its golden grille doors—the amount of gold was becoming obscene—and onto thick, violet carpets.

Harry frowned as he looked down a corridor lined with identical doors, only differentiated by the names and titles on their plaques. He didn’t see a secretary, or a directory, so he was forced to look at every door to find the one his interviewer was behind.

He sighed, checking his watch. It seemed navigating the Ministry relied almost entirely on committing things to memory, at least for the floor he was currently on. At long last, he found the door to Secretary Eun-ha Moon’s office and knocked.

The door silently opened, and he saw a small woman with a severe hair cut standing up from her desk.

“Right on time, Mr. Evans,” she said, shaking his hand and gesturing to a chair. “Please have a seat.”

Harry sat down, resisting the urge to look around the room and focusing on Secretary Moon.

“I was just reviewing your application,” Secretary Moon said, glancing up at him through her glasses. “Congratulations on your O.W.L.s, we rarely see someone with all Os.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said.

She gave him a faint smile, then picked up a stack of paper, presumably his application. “Now, normally we take a student’s interests into consideration when assigning them to a division for the summer. We also did have a request for you specifically.”

“Really?” Harry asked. Who could have possibly asked for him? He doubted Amos Diggory would. Mr. Weasley?

“Yes, from the Official Gobstones Club,” Secretary Moon said, sounding amused. “Unfortunately, an intern is not within their budget, and recent events have forced our hand. I’m sure you saw the news this morning.”

Harry was still processing Captain Lament trying to manipulate him into more gobstones. “You mean Ireland beating Argentina?”

“More pertinently, Britain is hosting the World Cup for the first time in several decades,” Secretary Moon said. “While we have been working on this since the beginning of the year, we expect an uptick in British attendees. A critical position has recently been vacated, and based on your background, I think you would be a perfect fit. You will also be given a special dispensation to perform magic while on duty.”

Curious, and potentially offended by what she meant by *background*, Harry asked, “What is it?”

Secretary Moon laced her fingers together. “Tell me, Mr. Evans. What do you know about portkeys?”

Severus returned from Hogwarts to find his son on the living room floor, holding his cat above his head.

“How was your interview?” he asked.

Harry lowered Lady Madeleine to his chest, which she began kneading. He winced, and nudged her off. “She congratulated me on my O.W.L.s.”

Severus nodded. His son had performed admirably, as expected.

“I’ve got an internship with the Department of Magical Transportation,” Harry said. “The Portkey Office. It starts on the first.”

“That is not what I expected,” Severus said, glancing at the lone armchair in the room. Would Harry like his own chair? The boy had always been content to sit on the floor. Then again, should anyone call they would question the existence of a second chair. Harry was capable of conjuring his own, should he so desire. Putting the question aside for later, he walked into the kitchen to begin preparing lunch.

Harry snorted, then rolled to his feet to trail after him. “I didn’t either. We’re hosting the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup. We’ve got to arrange transportation for a hundred thousand people worldwide. That’s two hundred portkeys in Britain alone. At least.”

Harry dropped into one of the kitchen chairs and laid his head on the table. “It could be interesting, and I get to turn things into portkeys. Maybe. I haven’t met the supervisor yet. It sounds like a ton of logistics.”

“A puzzle,” Severus said, looking through the cabinets. What would Harry want to eat? Perhaps he would be interested in helping?

“That’s a good way of thinking about it,” Harry said. “A big portkey puzzle I have to solve.”

“Before the Hogwarts Express, the school used portkeys,” he said, dropping several cookbooks in front of his son.

Harry made a face of disgust. “I took one with Cedric and his dad. The sensation is really emblematic of spending time with them.”

Severus chuckled, and sat down across from his son. “You know how to cook the muggle way, correct?”

“Basic things, yeah,” Harry said, picking up one of the books. “I mostly nicked tinned things since it was easier, you know?”

Severus felt a twinge of guilt at the reminder of his son’s earlier years. If Lily had said anything, left any sign...but she hadn’t expected to die. Hadn’t expected both of her parents to die. Hadn’t expected him to become a better person. And he hadn’t, not until his own actions put her in danger. His change of heart had been purely selfish. Harry deserved to have Lily, not him.

“There is no time like the present,” Severus said. There was no use in dwelling in the past. Harry needed him in the present. “As I recall, there are few dining options in the Ministry itself. It would be prudent to make your own lunch.”

“I could get takeaway,” Harry said. For some reason Severus refused to analyze, this made his son blush.

“Are you being paid?” he asked.

Harry grinned at him. “Five galleons a week.”

“A veritable fortune,” Severus said, glad his son was actually being paid. If the Ministry wanted free labor, they had house-elves at their disposal.

“Since I can’t apparate, they’ll cover travel expenses too,” Harry said. “Or maybe I’ll just make portkeys to wherever I need to go. It’s either that or flying everywhere.”

Harry’s cat growled.

“I’ll learn to apparate this year,” Harry said, sticking his head under the table. “I won’t be able to get a license until my next birthday, though.”

Severus cleared his throat, and Harry sat back up.

“You did very well on your O.W.L.s,” he said, reaching into his robes. “And you upheld our agreement from last year.”

Harry’s eyes widened, and Severus suppressed a smile as he set a soft silver egg before his son. Harry picked it up reverently.

“One occamy egg,” he said.

Harry beamed at him, hugging the egg to his cheek. “Thanks, dad! This is perfect! Incubation!”

Severus felt a sense of unease at his son’s words, but dismissed it.

“Incubate your dangerous creature later,” he said. “What would you like for lunch?”

A red envelope sailed in through the window and landed in front of Harry, smoldering. Harry leapt up and ran off with his egg, Lady Madeleine racing after him.

Severus quickly cast a silencing charm around the Howler and decided dinner would be a better meal to prepare together.

Instant Coffee

Chapter Summary

June 1994

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was Monty's least favorite day of the year: Dudley's birthday. Dudley was ignoring his very generous breakfast of an entire half of grapefruit in favor of counting his presents. Monty had a quarter of a grapefruit, as Aunt Petunia had got it into her head that if Dudley had to be on a diet, they all did. Monty didn't think his aunt had any more weight to lose, and was a little concerned neither of them would survive the summer.

"Thirty-nine," Dudley said, looking up from the small mountain in the living room. "That's two less than last year."

"Not this again," Monty muttered, eyeing Dudley's grapefruit. In the excitement of presents, his cousin had forgotten to eat it.

"What was that, boy?" Uncle Vernon snapped, leaving off his fawning over Dudley to glare at Monty.

"Did you count the one from Aunt Marge?" Monty asked his cousin, who was working himself up into a classic tantrum. What would Dudley's friends think if they saw Dinky Duddydums crying like a baby because he hadn't got enough presents?

Monty looked away from Dudley ripping open a PlayStation—to the accompaniment of Uncle Vernon bragging about winning it in some exclusive drill industry auction—when the doorbell rang.

"Well, get the door!" Uncle Vernon said, smiling broadly at his son. Aunt Petunia was too busy taking a picture of Dudley squinting at the Japanese writing on the box to have heard.

Monty set his quarter of a grapefruit down and walked to the foyer. No doubt it was more gifts for Dudders. He mulishly opened the door and froze.

Sirius grinned at him. "I told you I'd be around."

Monty could only gawk at him, not believing his eyes.

"Alright, Monty?" Sirius asked, leaning down. "I didn't interrupt anything, did I?"

Monty shook his head. “It’s Dudley’s—”

“Who is it, boy?” Uncle Vernon roared.

A dark expression crossed Sirius’ face. “It’s his godfather,” he called back.

The living room went completely silent.

Sirius chuckled. “You’re already dressed, that’s good. Let’s get out of here. Unless you wanted to stay?”

“No,” Monty said emphatically. “They gave me a quarter of a grapefruit for breakfast.”

There was a strangled noise from the living room.

“So we’ll get breakfast,” Sirius said, stepping back to show Monty how he had got there. It was a motorbike with a sidecar attached. “What do you want to eat?”

Monty was still winded from their flight to London. That it was daylight hadn’t fazed Sirius. The motorbike came fully equipped with invisibility, which Sirius admitted was a recent addition.

“I didn’t think I’d be allowed to leave until my birthday,” Monty said, overwhelmed by the amount of food spread out between them. Sirius had taken him to a diner and ordered half the menu. Toast, bacon, eggs, beans, fried mushrooms, Belgian waffles...

He hadn’t expected to get a decent meal until school started again, given the days of privation since his return to Privet Drive. There was, he noticed, something different about muggle food. It all tasted good, familiar. It was identical to what they might have for breakfast at Hogwarts. However, there was a dimension missing. Something washed out.

“That’s actually something we need to talk about,” Sirius said, pouring sugar into his coffee. He sighed as he added the cream. Monty held his tongue. What had Sirius eaten in Azkaban? He doubted anything good. He deserved all the sugar he could get.

“Me living with the Dursleys?” Monty asked.

Sirius nodded, his expression grave. “I would love for you to live with me, Monty, but you have to call that place home. It has to be a place you can return to, no matter what.”

“Why?” Monty asked. If Sirius didn’t tell him the truth...

“Because you’re safe from Voldemort there,” Sirius said, meeting Monty’s eyes. “According to Dumbledore, that’s only true so long as you, in his words, call your aunt’s house your home.”

Sirius picked up his coffee, his eyes growing distant.

“You don’t believe him?” Monty asked.

“No, I do,” Sirius said bitterly. “Would I have even been *allowed* to raise you?” He shook his head. “Sorry for bringing the mood down. I just...I didn’t want to get your hopes up. Once I get the house fixed up, you’re more than welcome to stay for a few weeks. I’ll come by Privet Drive whenever you want, but I can’t...I can’t give you a home.”

Monty nodded. He had already accepted he would inevitably be returned to Privet Drive. It would be stupid to abandon that kind of protection. Still, he felt let down. That Sirius was just as unhappy didn't help.

He looked up at Sirius, who had gone completely still.

“Sirius?” he asked.

Sirius blinked, then shook his head, smiling at Monty again. “Sorry, kid. That’s another reason why it was *strongly suggested* we don’t live together. I am...very angry. With a lot of people.”

“Me too,” Monty said, piling a slice of toast with a fried egg and beans.

Sirius cleared his throat, then turned to his cooling food. “Did you have any plans for the summer?”

“Besides staying in my room and pretending I don’t exist?” Monty said. He regretted it when he saw Sirius’ expression.

“It was just a joke,” he quickly added. “They don’t make me do that anymore.”

“Anymore,” Sirius muttered, glaring into his coffee. He took a few deep breaths before looking up again, his smile returning. “So, plans?”

There was a muted explosion from the room next door, and something heavy fell on the floor.

Percy glared at the wall, grabbing his inkwell so it wouldn’t spill. It sounded like something massive and wet was writhing around. Had Fred and George managed to kill one of themselves? It was only a matter of time with how reckless they were. He heard his mother marching up the stairs and turned back to the letter he was writing.

Two days into the holiday and he was already sick of being at home.

Percy gritted his teeth and started the next line. As long as he lived in his parents' house, he had to abide by their rules. His mother's rules. If she called for him and he didn't reply because of a silencing charm, he'd never hear the end of it. Not to mention silence from the twins' room was almost never a good sign.

He had a week until he started work, and he didn't know what to do with himself.

No more Hogwarts.

No more Harry.

He heard the door to the twins' room fly open. "What is going on in here?"

There was a garbled reply, and his mother shrieked.

Percy set his quill down and rubbed his temples. Madam Pomfrey had given him the last of her litorin stock, a remarkably generous gesture. It was unlikely there would be another student with the condition and it was of little use to her, as she had explained. If Percy was careful, he could stretch it for one month, maybe two. Long enough for him to have some savings, then he could purchase it for himself.

A knock on his door startled him from his musings.

"Percy, dear," his mother said, opening his door without waiting for a response. "It's time for lunch."

"Yes, mother," he said. "I'll be down momentarily."

She smiled at him and left. He shut the door and turned back to his letter. There wasn't much else to say, so he signed and sealed it.

Downstairs, his mother was dishing up bowls of mouth-watering stew. Percy noted none of his other siblings were down yet, so he took a seat to patiently wait.

"Mother," he said as a steaming bowl settled in front of him. "I would like to learn how to cook."

"There's no need for that, dear," she said cheerily, removing a loaf of bread from the oven.

"I believe there is," Percy said. "With my condition—"

"Ron!" she shouted. "Ginny!"

"What?" Ginny shouted back.

"It's lunchtime!"

Percy stared into his bowl of stew, his stomach growling. He could find a way to do it behind her back, but his mother spent half of her time in the kitchen, the other half within a short distance from it. Maybe when she was asleep, but then she'd notice ingredients were missing,

or that things weren't put back properly. There were restaurants in the muggle world, he had been to several with Harry. Would he have time to find somewhere to have lunch every day?

A galleon didn't go as far in the muggle world.

Percy sighed and picked up his spoon.

Severus warily eyed his son. He knew a bored child was cause for trouble. A bored magical teenager was cause for disaster.

Harry had constructed a sling and pouch for his occamy egg, inscribed with runes for warmth and growth. An occamy egg took one hundred and twenty-seven days to hatch. Harry seemed to be speeding up the process.

After clearing up lunch, his son had quietly sat at the kitchen table. He had been staring at an apparently blank piece of parchment for some time.

"Have you any plans for the holiday?" he asked.

Harry kept staring at the parchment.

"Harry?"

His son looked up at him. "Sorry, I was just thinking."

Severus frowned. "About what?"

"Matrilineal magic," Harry said.

"Are you referring to the Bond of Blood?" he asked. "It is not predicated on the sacrifice being a woman, nor a mother."

"No, not that," Harry said. "I can charm things so that only I can read them, but I want to charm something so that it's conditional on people having the same mother. The same blood isn't enough."

"You want correspondence between you and your brother to remain secret," Severus said. "More than it has been."

"Yes," Harry said, frowning slightly. "It's important."

"What about that thestral of yours?" Severus asked. "Were you not repairing that?"

"I am," Harry said, idly patting his egg pouch. "I've almost got it worked out. Charms alter the nature of something. It's simple to say *the nature of a thestral*, but condensing that to a

single spell is..." Harry trailed off, looking at his parchment again.

"You believe this other charm you are interested in would be easier to create?" Severus asked. "Low-hanging fruit?"

"I think it might already exist," Harry said. "Or a charm so that only family can read something, but that's too broad. Still, it only alters one quality, who can read something. Even if it describes a large group."

Harry dropped his head to the table, an endearing affectation that Severus himself sometimes indulged in. He was glad to see his son being expressive, in less volatile ways than Severus himself was. He knew that Harry's time managing Sirius Black had placed a great deal of stress on the boy, both mentally and physically. His son was also constantly concerned with the welfare of his brother. Being a prefect, being the captain of the gobstones team, his upcoming stint with the Ministry, were pressure enough for a teenage boy. Harry should be able to rely on adults to deal with greater concerns, and Severus was worried his son might never have that much trust in him.

Harry had been left to his own devices, relied on only himself, for far too long. Severus blamed Lily for not having enough foresight. He blamed himself for her not having more time.

Would his son ever truly rely on him?

Harry sat up again and resumed staring at the parchment. Severus could not fathom what was going on in his son's mind. A single sheet of parchment did not seem large enough to contain it all.

Monty stood on the porch of Number 4 Privet Drive, watching Sirius rev his motorbike's engine and shoot up into the sky, vanishing in the blink of an eye. His head still buzzed from their day out.

While Sirius had been friends with his parents, and was his godfather, they didn't know each other very well.

Sirius liked charms and transfiguration—it had taken him and Monty's dad three years to become animagi, and longer to make the Marauder's Map which Monty admitted to having. He learned Sirius and his dad, and Lupin and Pettigrew, had charmed the Map with their personalities. Sirius had run away in his fifth year and lived with Monty's dad and his parents. Monty's grandparents, Fleamont and Euphemia Potter.

Sirius had charmed the motorbike himself, which he admitted wasn't strictly legal. Sirius and Monty's dad had even been chased by police while riding it, though it ended with them knocking out three Ministry aurors with a police car.

He had been on the Gryffindor quidditch team, a chaser like Monty's dad. That's how Monty learned Sirius had a younger brother, Regulus, who had been the Slytherin seeker. He had disappeared years ago, before Sirius had gone to Azkaban. Sirius thought Voldemort had killed him. Their mother had gone mad with grief. Madder than she already had been, according to Sirius. He hadn't told Monty much about his family, the Black family, but Monty got the impression they weren't much better than the Dursleys, and very likely much worse. Happy children didn't run away from their homes.

The Dursleys weren't back from wherever they had taken Dudley and his friends. Paintballing, he thought. Monty wasn't jealous. If he had gone along it was inevitable he would be the main—only—target. Monty wasn't sure whose idea it was, and given Dudley's poor marks and enforced diet it seemed a very pointed choice. A way to prove Dudley wasn't *some swotty little nancy boy*, as Uncle Vernon had put it.

Monty opened the front door, kindly unlocked by Sirius, and didn't bother turning on any lights as he walked up to Dudley's second bedroom. *His* room, in his home.

He sighed as he climbed the stairs. Knowing there was a reason for being exiled to Little Whinging didn't make it any better. But Sirius had promised to visit at least once a week, and he had Hedwig who sometimes took matters into her own claws and harassed his friends to write to him. He had Harry's birthday to look forward to, and Neville's. It was surprising to learn Neville's was the day before his. And Monty's own birthday, of course, which was something he could reliably look forward to these days.

Swotty little nancy boy.

Monty snorted. Harry was definitely swotty, on the small side for a boy, and Uncle Vernon would probably call him a *nancy boy* if only for liking other boys. But Monty doubted Uncle Vernon would say something like that to Harry's face.

Someone had broken Pettigrew's nose the night he had been arrested, which Sirius had learned from Professor Lupin. Monty hoped Harry got in a few hits for him.

Smiling to himself, Monty shut his bedroom door, flicked on the light—to which Hedwig sleepily protested—and looked around. He could get a start on his summer assignments. He didn't have to worry about his things being taken away. He had an adult to stand up to the Dursleys for him. They wouldn't dare mistreat him, not anymore. He had people who *actually* cared about him.

What was it Luna had said? *Love is the most powerful magic*. Monty knew it was true. It was in his very blood.

Harry despondently propelled himself back to Spinner's Circle. It was twilight. Benjy had always been more lively around twilight. It was another quality of thestrals he had to take

into consideration.

The sun was distended and reddish as it sank below the rooftops, and the sky was a sickly brownish hue, interrupted by smoke pumped out by the steelworks drifting over the town.

Lady Madeleine had run off to hunt, sharpening her claws on rodents. She was almost a year old, and could now take care of herself. Harry was a little concerned she might get hit by a car, or targeted by disaffected Cokeworth youth, but she was smart and fast, and knew where to run for help if she needed it.

He checked on his occamy egg again. It was the size of an ostrich egg, not exactly unobtrusive. Opening the pouch would be equivalent to getting blasted in the face by a furnace. Incubating such an egg was a challenge, but Harry didn't trust anyone else with the matter. He imagined someone like Hagrid, or Newt Scamander himself, would do a better job of it, but Harry was decent enough at runes and charms to create the ideal environment. Only the mother herself keeping the silver egg close to its melting point would be better. So Harry hoped.

Harry looked up at the sky again and saw a dark shape outlined by the fading light. An owl, soaring towards him. He hoped it wasn't another Howler. Some people didn't have the presence of mind to realize letters that shouted their contents were very unusual in the muggle world.

Soon the owl was close enough to recognize, and he smiled at Hermes' fierce expression. He hadn't expected Percy to write to him, and him having done so only a few days after school had ended made Harry feel...

He held out his arm for Hermes' to land, taking the letter from his beak.

"How is he?" Harry asked.

Hermes clacked his beak, then looked at the letter.

Harry sighed, and began skating again. He might as well have taken the Care of Magical Creatures O.W.L. too.

Once he was home, Harry carried Hermes into the kitchen and got a bowl of water for him. He lit a few candles, then sat down to read his letter.

Most Esteemed Prefect Evans,

I sit idly in my chambers at the Burrow, the historic seat of the Weasley family. As you know, the Weasleys have long been prominent residents of Ottery St. Catchpole, though our diaspora has since spread across the British Isles.

The days since leaving Hogwarts for the last time have been an adjustment. In the past, I had always anticipated my return to the castle, a return to studies, with no small amount of eagerness. Now I await the beginning of my career.

I expect much of what I learn will be on-the-job, so to speak, but I am reviewing the Department of International Magical Cooperation's guidelines and policies so as to better arm myself. I have rarely had the opportunity to speak with foreign witches and wizards, and I must admit I am concerned about committing a faux pas. An International Studies course at Hogwarts would not be remiss. Once in the Ministry, I expect my increased access to information will allow for an amelioration of my ignorance.

I would not be so bold as to ask how your interview went. I cannot conceive of any result other than success. Have you been told which department you are working in? Perhaps we could arrange a meeting to discuss.

Please feel free to use Hermes for any reply. You needn't travel to an Owl Post Office on my behalf.

Warm regards,

Junior Secretary Weasley

Department of International Magical Cooperation

Harry covered his smile with a hand, telling himself that the warmth he felt was probably the containment runes on his occamy incubation pouch failing. He set Percy's letter down and walked to the stove to put the kettle on. The wireless Percy had given him was on the counter, and Harry turned the volume up, pleased that it was on the same station.

"Junior secretary," he said, still smiling. Hermes hooted in agreement. Harry turned to look at the owl. "I suppose I ought to congratulate him."

Percy was enjoying a cup of tea he had brewed himself. One thing he would miss about Hogwarts was the coffee. His family couldn't afford it.

He had successfully woken before his mother and managed to conjure his own water for the kettle. It was another complication in his life. His mother didn't shop at muggle stores. Most of their food was grown or raised at the Burrow, saturated with magic. His mother's magic, encouraging the plants to grow, the pigs to fatten, the hens to lay. Everything was steeped in magic. It was inescapable.

It wasn't quite dawn, the Burrow experiencing a rare period of blessed silence. There were few early risers in the Weasley family. His mother and himself, Bill when he still lived at home. Everyone else stayed up late and slept late, or in Ron's case mostly slept. Ron's room being right under the attic, under a ghoul who would start banging the pipes if things got too

quiet, meant Ron could sleep through almost anything. Could Percy convince him to switch rooms? He would rather deal with the ghoul than the twins.

There was a peck at the window, and Percy was surprised to see Hermes perched outside. Percy got up to open it, and he felt a thrum of excitement when he saw a folded letter in Hermes' beak.

"Do you still have time to hunt?" he quietly asked, taking the letter.

Hermes nipped him reproachfully and flew back outside to pick off a garden gnome.

Shaking his head, Percy sat back down and unfolded the letter.

He toppled backwards as something burst out and hit the wall. Percy pushed his glasses back up and righted his chair, looking around for whatever had come out of the letter. How?

He spotted a large paper bag that had been tied with twine and retrieved it from the floor. Mystified, Percy returned to the letter, hoping it held an explanation. The paper was lined and thin, muggle notebook paper. That could only mean one person, not that he hadn't already known.

Dear Junior Secretary Weasley,

Did you know that extension charms can be cast on envelopes? They work on anything with a cavity. Envelopes are only folded paper. I'm pretty sure the charm will break once it's unfolded. I hope you've read the warning on the outside. If not, you have my condolences.

Percy flipped over the letter and saw Harry had indeed written *CAUTION: POTENTIALLY EXPLOSIVE CONTENTS* on the outside. He sighed, and kept reading.

Congratulations on your new position. I hope it isn't presumptuous of me, but I've sent a gift I suspect you'll enjoy.

My interview happened. I wasn't sure what I was expecting, I've never done an interview before. More questions? I didn't think I'd get a job right off the bat. Are you familiar with that idiom? Quidditch has got bats, so I would imagine so.

I'll be working at the Portkey Office. They need people familiar with the muggle world, and I'll be learning how to make portkeys. Since Ireland's won, and we're hosting the World Cup, domestic attendance has shot up.

I'd love to meet up before work starts. Let me know when you're free.

Sincerely,

Ministry Intern Evans

Portkey Office

Percy folded the letter back up, not quite the same way Harry had sent it. An extension charm on a self-made envelope. Harry was so...

He tucked the letter into a pocket and untied the paper bag. Inside there was a large glass jar with the label *Douwe Egberts*, filled with small, dark brown pellets. Harry had attached a note to it with an explanation and instructions.

Instant coffee?

Smiling helplessly, Percy stood to put the kettle on again.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was difficult to write. Physically difficult, it's cold as balls and my pipes are frozen :(

Intrepid Explorers

Chapter Summary

June 1994

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Haz,

Sorry about the Howler, forgot about the muggles. I'll send it in the middle of the night next time.

Never thought we'd live down what Luxembourg did to us. Ireland was our last hope. Solid team, Moran's brilliant. Three weeks is not that long for a game. What'd you call Montague when he slagged off gobstones? Phyllis Teen? What's a Phyllis?

Mum's going to get tickets for us. She says it'll be all hands on deck at the Ministry. Think you'll get the day off?

Got in the Harpies' training camp again! It's been cut to four weeks this year due to the World Cup. Mum won't let me take Moo-Moo with me. Dad says I can get my own owl when they decide I won't 'abuse the privilege,' whatever that means.

Mhairi says 'hi.' She can read now and says that's not what she said.

The parchment was torn and crumbled after that line, and continued in clumsier handwriting interrupted by flowers and what looked like baby seals.

She says I have to finish letters with 'love.' If she gets sorted into Hufflepuff I will never live it down. No sister of mine!

We're off to a muggle zoo for her birthday. Write back soon.

LOVE

Astrid

AND MHAIRI

PS Mhairi wrote that

Moo-Moo the barn owl stared at him from the other side of the table.

“That seat’s reserved,” Harry said, rolling up the scroll Astrid had sent him. “I haven’t got time to write her back right now.

Moo-Moo cocked her head, then flew off.

Harry sighed and tucked Astrid’s letter away. All of his friends were going to the Quidditch World Cup, even Jasmine who had always been lukewarm about the sport. It was the event of the year. He didn’t think he’d make it. Even if Harry wanted to go he couldn’t afford a ticket. His own disinterest in quidditch was matched by his dad’s, and he didn’t want his dad to waste money on something neither of them wanted to go to.

He took a sip of his latte, and looked around Diagon Alley. He wasn’t sure why Percy had wanted to meet him there when a muggle cafe would have been fine.

“I hope you didn’t wait long.”

Harry nearly spat out his drink, quickly composing himself to smile up at Percy. Percy was resplendent in a set of royal purple dress robes that made Harry’s mouth go dry.

“I just got here,” Harry said, watching Percy as he took a seat. “I ordered for you, I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Percy said, picking up the black coffee Harry had got him. “Thank you for your gift. I had no idea muggles could make food instantly.”

Harry suppressed a grin. “I think a lot of effort goes into making a product like that. There’s all sorts of instant foods, or things that only take a few minutes to make. It’s not the best stuff, but it’s cheap and convenient.”

Percy nodded thoughtfully, sipping his coffee.

“Why did you want to meet here?” Harry asked. “A muggle place is fine with me, you know.”

Percy’s blushed lightly. “I am fine eating magical food, if I have my medication. In moderation. I would still need to take it even if I had an entirely muggle diet. I cannot completely eradicate all traces of external magic from my life.”

Harry took another sip to avoid having to respond right away. “I could teach you how to cook like a muggle.”

Percy’s blush deepened. “I have expressed an interest in learning how to cook from my mother. She insists that it is not necessary.”

“Why not?” Harry asked. “Wouldn’t she like the help?”

Percy sighed, staring into his coffee. “I did not intend for our discussion to begin like this.”

Harry sat back. “I’m sorry. You don’t...we don’t have to talk about your family if you don’t want to.”

Percy’s lips thinned. He took out his wand and cast a silencing charm. The bustle of Diagon Alley immediately died away. “You once mentioned you have problems with your kidneys.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, feeling uncomfortable. “It’s part of a larger condition.”

Percy nodded. “I have not had anyone to talk with about this. I’m not entirely sure I can put it into words. When I was first diagnosed, my parents were in denial. My mother, mostly. It was not something they had heard of before. How could someone be allergic to magic? That was how they thought about it. Magic is in everything in our world. The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the air we breathe. What happens to magic when a spell ends?”

“It dissipates,” Harry said. “It becomes part of everything.”

“Precisely,” Percy said. “Even in the muggle world, though they don’t know it. For us, magic is a natural part of life. Mother doesn’t cut vegetables by hand, she charms the knives to do it for her. If something is broken, it’s a simple spell to fix it. Magical problems have magical solutions. We take risks muggles would think insane. I wouldn’t have even considered that had I not taken Muggles Studies, and learned what kinds of things muggles view as risks. Such as your sport. Skateboarding?”

Harry nodded. “People can get really hurt.”

“Yes,” Percy said, glancing at Harry’s hand. “You had that cast. A broken bone takes seconds to fix with magic. For muggles it can be weeks, or months. It could be a lifelong issue. Quidditch is a very dangerous sport compared to muggle sports, but flying is part of everyday life. No one raised in our world thinks of flying a broom as dangerous.”

“Right,” Harry said. “Muggleborns have a harder time in flying class.”

“They don’t quite believe magic can fix anything,” Percy said, “not at first. Even though that isn’t always true, it’s still what we believe. And while the medication I take is difficult to obtain and expensive, it was still seen as the solution to my problem. In other words, the problem no longer exists.”

“But that’s not—”

“It’s partially my fault,” Percy said. “The expense was a burden on my parents. *I* was a burden. I did not want to add to their hardship, so I pretended like nothing was wrong. I hid my symptoms. I doubt most of my siblings are aware I have a disease. It’s not something we talk about.”

Harry wrapped his arms around himself. “Percy...”

Percy frowned. "My mother...family is her entire life, but with so many children things get overlooked. She mixes Fred and George up, though we all know she can tell them apart. She doesn't remember preferences, such as Ron's hatred for the color maroon and corned beef. She wouldn't let Ginny fly, not until the healers said it would be good for her recovery. She wants us all to work for the Ministry. You should have heard the row when Charlie said he was going to work with dragons. Most of her attention is on managing the twins and raising the daughter she always wanted. There is a lot of vying for attention."

Harry silently watched Percy drain his coffee, then sink into his chair.

"I shouldn't have aired my family's private business," Percy said, closing his eyes. "I shouldn't be complaining about my family to someone who doesn't have one."

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. "It's fine. I know what it's like to not have anyone to talk to about things." Harry swallowed, then added, "I like learning more about your life."

Percy's ears went red, and he pushed his glasses up. "You've already proven to be a reliable confidante. You discovered my diabetes on your own and, as far as I know, have told no one."

"It's your private business," Harry said, giving him a faint smile. "I've only told Astrid about my condition. I tried to tell Cedric, but..." He shook his head. "It went very badly."

Percy's expression darkened. "Diggory is a fool."

"Among other things," Harry said. "So your mum won't let you cook?"

"It would offend her," Percy said.

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again. He wanted to ask *who cares*, but knew that if his mum suddenly came back to life he would do anything to make her happy. If that meant eating food she made, no matter how bad it tasted or how sick it made him, he would. He didn't even know if his mum *could* cook. It was another thing he might never know.

"Why don't you move out?" he asked. "You're old enough, you've got a job."

Percy looked uncomfortable. "It would make her unhappy. But, there are other issues. A galleon is worth about five pounds, but a galleon is also worth much more than five pounds depending on where you spend it. Particularly when it comes to food. Our drinks here only cost a few sickles, but in the muggle world would be at least a galleon. The same thing applies to property. We can conjure buildings and furniture. We can charm a small space into a larger one, which is of course regulated by the Ministry," he added, giving Harry a loaded look. "It is simply cheaper to live in the magical world, and our wages reflect that."

Percy sighed, then stared into his empty coffee cup. "I've lived at home my entire life, it's no hardship to stay there."

Harry nodded, but he wasn't entirely convinced. There were ways of getting what you needed in the muggle world, though he doubted Percy would be willing to Confund a muggle

landlord to save a few galleons. More than a few. He had no idea how much a flat in London would cost. A hundred pounds? Two? Forty galleons? He could live at the Leaky Cauldron for half a year with that. The allowance he got from Hogwarts seemed even more paltry in muggle terms. Two hundred and fifty pounds to last an entire year?

Asking how much Percy was getting paid seemed too invasive. Percy could manage his own finances, his own life. If he wanted to live with his parents, why shouldn't he? Even if Percy didn't seem happy about it.

Harry had no idea how to help him. If Percy even wanted help.

"I used to steal things," Harry said, picking up his latte. It had gone cold, but he didn't want to risk accidentally exploding it with Percy around. Percy was...his robes were very handsome. And using his wand in the middle of Diagon Alley was a little too bold while he was still underage.

Percy looked surprised. "Why?"

Harry leaned back. "Because it was the only way to get food. Professor Snape caught me." He grinned at Percy's appalled expression. "It turned out I was using magic, accidentally, to get away with it. He gave me chores to do during the summer to earn money."

"That was kind of him," Percy said neutrally.

"I had just turned twelve," Harry said with a shrug. "I stole a lot of money to pay for my supplies first year. I didn't know there was an allowance for students like me."

"Why are you telling me this?" Percy asked.

Harry leaned forward. "I know what it's like to be poor, and to have to make hard decisions. I think it's really sweet of you, that you want to make your mum happy."

Even if it was at Percy's expense. Harry didn't know what it was like to have parents with expectations. His dad seemed to trust him to largely take care of himself. It would have been awkward otherwise, given Harry had been doing just that for years.

Percy blushed again. Harry was slightly obsessed with how easily it happened. He had rarely seen someone blush in real life, and it seemed endemic to Weasleys. It started with Percy's ears, then gradually turned his entire face pink. It was captivating.

"Why are you wearing dress robes?" Harry asked, biting his lip as Percy turned bright red.

"You mentioned the need for Ministry-appropriate garments," he said.

Harry's smile grew. "You want to go robe shopping? With me?"

Percy cleared his throat. "Having lived among wizards my entire life, I believe I can be of assistance."

“Let’s do it,” Harry said, standing up. Percy gave him a startled look. “I was planning on going later, but now’s a good time. Want to check out the Second-Hand Robes? I wanted to find some books on clothing spells too. There’s got to be a spell for transfiguring robes into suits.”

Harry glanced at Percy’s robes again, imagining the deep purple fabric transfigured into a plum-colored suit. He turned away before he started blushing too.

“That is an excellent idea,” Percy said as they began to walk. “Mother knows various spells for needlework, but none which transfigure clothing out of whole cloth.”

Harry covered his mouth to laugh. He looked up to see Percy’s hazel eyes dancing with amusement, his expression completely neutral.

“You’re really funny,” he said.

Percy looked away. “Words spoken for the first time in history.”

Harry snorted. “It’s true, you’ve got a great sense of humor.”

“I think people are more inclined to laugh *at* me,” Percy said.

They reached the second-hand robes store and paused. Harry lightly touched Percy’s arm, making him jump.

“They just don’t appreciate how subtle you are,” he said. “But you bring up an interesting point as to why clothing conjuration and transfiguration isn’t more common. Conjuring a tablecloth is much simpler than conjuring a wedding dress, for example. Most people can conceive of a sheet of fabric. But how many know how to make a dress? If it were so easy, Madam Malkin wouldn’t be in business.”

Harry pulled open the door, and stood back for Percy to enter first.

“You are exactly right,” Percy said, straightening his own robes. “It is also why animate to inanimate transfiguration is taught to us first. A cup is less complex than a toucan.”

“No one really questions the order in which we learn things,” Harry said. “It’s cumulative. You should have seen my transfiguration O.W.L. Some of the things people did were nightmarish. We had to transfigure a gobstone into a skunk and back, and someone ended up partially encasing the skunk in glass. No one could undo it, so we had to watch the poor thing suffocate.”

Percy grimaced. “Not many progress to N.E.W.T. Transfiguration. Nor Potions, for that matter. The more advanced the magic becomes, the more perilous. People who attempt magic beyond their means keep the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad in business.”

Percy stopped in front of a rack of robes in various shades of black. “Now, I believe you prefer black?”

“I do,” Harry said, looking at the options. “I’ve got muggle dye I could use to make things blacker, or I could charm it.”

Percy sighed. “You are fifteen.”

“For another month,” Harry pointed out.

“Nevertheless,” Percy said. “Robes are a given. Many witches and wizards, particularly those of older generations, *only* wear robes.”

Percy gave Harry a significant look.

“They’re starkers?” Harry asked. “You mean, Professor Dumbledore—”

“A cloak is a common accessory,” Percy said, speaking loudly over him. “Hose, depending on the weather. Hats are optional, and varied. Footwear is as well. Some witches and wizards prefer to do without, and many people with creature heritages find it too confining. I suppose it depends on what kind of feet they have, or if they have any at all.”

Harry nodded along, trying not to smile like an idiot. He could listen to Percy talk about magical fashion all day.

“The material is more important than the style,” Percy continued. “Muggle synthetics will stand out. You’ll want leather. Leather from cattle is what is popular among muggles, but you’ll find dragonhide to be the dominant material...”

Percy looked up from the muggle book he was perusing. *I, Claudius* by Robert Graves. Harry had chosen it for him.

He could hardly believe he had said so much about his family to Harry. It wasn’t something he dwelt on, the relationship he had with his parents, with his siblings. It felt selfish and ungrateful to complain. He had a family, a big family. He knew his parents loved him, and that his brothers and sister did even if they would rather die than say something like that out loud. But he knew he was the odd one out. He didn’t get along well with any of them. They barely had anything in common, other than a name.

But Harry hadn’t judged him. He only wanted to listen. He seemed almost eager for stories about Percy’s family. Harry liked learning about him. He had always been interested in whatever Percy had to say. It was overwhelming.

After acquiring robes and other accoutrement—Harry remained dedicated to wearing all black, while being obviously entertained by Percy’s broader tastes—they had gone looking for books on the textile arts. One tome Harry had unearthed was several centuries out of date, but he insisted the spells could be adapted for modern usage. However, they were both

thrown by terminology such as *French seam* and *armscye*, hence their sojourn to a muggle library.

“Your mother’s very good at knitting,” Harry said quietly.

“She charms the knitting needles,” Percy said.

“She still has to know all the different stitches, and how to do the colorwork,” Harry said.

Percy looked over and saw that Harry had got a knitting book from somewhere.

“Are you interested in knitting?” Percy asked.

“I’m more interested in the charms,” Harry said, smiling at him. Harry’s eye lingered on him, and Percy reminded himself once again he needed to continue his occlumency practice. It was hard to progress without a Legilimens to test him, but he didn’t know any. Not that anyone would admit to practicing such a thing. He considered asking Harry, who he knew had an interest in the subject, but the thought of Harry performing legilimency on him was... distressing.

Percy was not oblivious to the appreciative looks Harry had been giving him. After his confrontation with Aunt Muriel, and their continued correspondence in which she alluded to *suitable young men*, Percy could no longer delude himself.

It was easier to simply be friends with Harry. He was fifteen, he was still in Hogwarts. Him being muggleborn, him being male...well, his parents would accept the former. Encourage it, even. They weren’t blood purists. What would Aunt Muriel think of Harry?

Percy pulled out his pocket watch, not daring to think of what a relationship could even look like with Harry. A Ministry employee and a Hogwarts student? The scandal. Rita Skeeter could make a fortune from Weasley family gossip alone. Did Harry deserve someone with an incurable disease? It was possible Percy would die young, far younger than other witches and wizards lived. Not to mention the financial burden.

That was thinking too far ahead. He had his career to focus on, Harry had school to finish. They were still teenagers. Percy had heard his mother go on about Bill and Charlie *settling down* far too many times. Not everyone got married straight out of Hogwarts like his parents had.

Percy recalled the pocket watch in his hand and actually looked at the time. He was losing his mind.

“Shall we?” he asked, putting his watch away.

Harry sighed and closed the knitting book. “No wonder people buy their clothing. It’d take weeks to make a pair of socks the muggle way. *Fingering weight*, honestly.”

They left the library books for the librarians to reshelve, something muggle librarians had in common with Madam Pince, and recommenced their overland journey towards the Ministry of Magic. Though they had found spells to transfigure Percy’s robes into muggle wear,

neither of them wanted to risk testing them on dress robes. Instead, Harry had suggested a muggle-repelling charm so that muggles wouldn't notice he was wearing robes. It was such a simple solution Percy wondered why it was not more widely employed.

"I was thinking we could use the visitor's entrance," Percy said, looking around. "I should have brought a map."

"What street is it on?" Harry asked.

They paused at an intersection, watching as liveried men on horseback rode grandly past.

"Fascinating," he said. "It is in Whitehall, I am unsure of the precise location."

"They're part of the military, I think," Harry said of the horsemen. "We don't have anything like that. The closest would be aurors, but we don't engage in warfare the same way muggles do."

"Grindelwald tried," Percy said as they crossed the street.

"And it only took one man with a stick to end that dream," Harry said drily.

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," Percy began.

"Defeated by a baby," Harry said, crossing his arms. A small flock of pigeons scattered, cooing indignantly. "Not even a baby with a stick."

They turned down a small street and saw a red telephone box. As they neared, Percy noticed the wall behind it had been heavily graffitied, and the telephone box itself was in disrepair

"Well, this is conspicuous," Harry said, opening the door. The few intact panes of glass shook. "I think a police box would have been more accommodating. How is it meant to work?"

"You pick up the receiver and dial six, two, four, four, two."

Harry stepped inside, raising an eyebrow at the crooked telephone. "Whoever set this up must have been a muggleborn."

"Why is that?" Percy asked.

"It's manky, and it looks like it's out of order," Harry said. "No muggle would use it. And the numbers spell out *magic*. I think we both have to be in here, Percy."

"Right," Percy said. He hadn't known how small the telephone box would be. It was a tight fit, and he pressed himself against a wall to try to avoid touching Harry, while simultaneously hunching so he wouldn't knock his head against the ceiling.

Harry gave him a wry look. "See, the numbers are all associated with three letters, so you can spell things out. Or pick a phone number that spells something, so it's easier to remember."

Harry lifted the receiver and dialed the code.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic,” a dispassionate voice said, the sound filling the box. “Please state your name and business.”

“Percy Weasley and Harry Evans,” Harry said promptly, smiling at him. “On an adventure.”

“Harry,” Percy hissed. “This is *not* an—”

Two square silver badges rolled out of the coin chute, and Harry passed one to him. *Percy Weasley, Intrepid Explorer.*

“It’s a souvenir,” Harry said, pinning one onto his jumper. It was a jumper Percy’s mother had made, with a large snake on it. At first, Percy hadn’t noticed any additional charms on it, but occasionally the snake would flick its tongue as if tasting the air.

Percy blinked then looked at the phone. “Did I miss something?”

“Just that we need to get searched by security and present our wands,” Harry said as the telephone box rattled and began sinking into the ground. “Reckon anyone actually uses this entrance?”

“I believe it is something of a novelty,” Percy said.

They were plunged into darkness. Percy closed his eyes, even though it was useless. He was still painfully aware of Harry. The comforting scents of mint and lavender. The warmth he exuded. It was....

“You can open your eyes now,” Harry said quietly.

Percy did so, flushing when he saw Harry regarding him with his dark gaze.

“The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day,” the cool voice said.

The door sprang open, and Harry brushed past him to step out onto the gleaming wood floors of the Atrium. Percy stared at him, mesmerized by the image of Harry lit by the brilliant golden light.

Harry turned back to smile at him. “Where to first?”

Chapter End Notes

Forgot to title the chapter, hahaha. I'm good.

Egg Sandwich

Chapter Summary

July 1994

Chapter Notes

It is today! It is still today!

I've adjusted Harry's salary to five galleons a week. I also went back and edited "gotten" out of *every* chapter hahaha fuck :)

Severus quietly watched as his son did something incredibly suspicious.

It was Harry's first day of work, and to commemorate the momentous occasion, Harry had offered to make breakfast. Severus didn't quite follow his son's logic, but was inclined to indulge the boy. Harry had expressed an interest in learning how to cook with magic, and had spent several days absorbing the cookbooks Severus had. Harry was, in fact, employing several of the spells he learned while preparing breakfast. Boiling water, charming knives to slice tomatoes, directing a fish slice to flip eggs. The last seemed more effort than simply picking up the utensil and flipping the eggs by hand.

Cooking breakfast in and of itself was not cause for suspicion. What perplexed Severus was that his son was also making himself lunch, but entirely without magic. Harry had been unresponsive when questioned.

Severus looked over his son's attire. Austere black robes, dragonhide shoes—boots were apparently difficult to skateboard in.

There was something missing.

"Where is your egg?" Severus asked.

Harry looked up from the sandwich he was constructing. Three pieces of bread?

"Maddie's on top of it," Harry said, pointing to the living room. Severus leaned forward to see the cat on his armchair, sitting on top of an ostrich egg-sized pouch of black velvet.

Severus looked at Harry again, and his son smiled.

“You neglected to remove your retainers,” he observed.

Harry’s smile became a scowl, and he turned back to finish putting together the sandwich. He was taking excessive care in its creation. Normally his son was not a picky eater. Having food was more important than the kind of food, barring Harry’s various allergies. And Harry was clearly more invested in the sandwich, which was largely hidden from view, than their breakfast.

“Are you nervous?” Severus asked, watching as Harry directed plates and cutlery to the table, followed by cups, fresh coffee, condiments.

The sandwich was carefully wrapped in butcher paper and placed in a lunchbox, along with tiny woodland strawberries and raspberries. Severus did not know where Harry had acquired them. There weren’t many options for foraging around Cokeworth, but he imagined a desperate and hungry child would be willing to strike out for the greater world. Perhaps the cat was behind it.

“No,” Harry said, sitting down. He removed his retainers and set them on the table.

Severus rarely saw his son wearing them anymore, and was pleased Harry persisted in wearing them at night. Severus’ own parents had never bothered taking him to a dentist, and his mother had gradually stopped using magic, or associating with magic at all. Taking him to St. Mungo’s was out of the question. His father would have been outraged. His appearance was nothing he had taken into consideration until others pointed it out to him. As a teenager, he hated being self-conscious, strove to act like he wasn’t. After Lily’s death, he had stopped caring about most everything. He had wished for years he didn’t care, but when it finally happened all Severus had felt was hollow.

He looked at the retainers sitting on the table, and decided to say nothing about it.

“Are you not taking your egg with you?” he asked.

Harry shook his head, charming the cafetière to pour them each coffee. “Maddie will take care of it for me. It’s not like I can wear it in public.”

“Obviously not,” Severus said flatly, examining the food. It appeared adequate. “I expected you would secret it about your person.”

Harry smiled slightly. “I thought about getting a hat and hiding the egg under it. A top hat.”

Severus sighed, and Harry’s smile grew.

There was an irate peck at the window.

Glad for the distraction of the morning post, Severus spelled the window open, allowing the *Daily Prophet* delivery owls in.

“I made that for you,” Harry said to the owls, pointing at a third plate with several pieces of sausage on it. Harry glanced at him. “I think they’re mad we don’t leave the window open for them.”

“They don’t have to breathe the air here,” Severus said. He paid the birds, who took their tip in sausage, and scanned the headlines. Still quidditch.

Harry skipped the front page completely, flipping rapidly through the paper.

“Are you looking for something specific?” Severus asked.

Harry’s eyes lit up, and he folded the paper in half. “Buckbeak’s been cleared of all charges.”

“The hippogriff?”

Harry gave him a dull look. “*The* hippogriff. The headmaster was there, I’m sure he told you.”

Severus narrowed his eyes, sipping the rich, bitter coffee. The headmaster had regaled them with the vigorous defense of Buckbeak the Hippogriff. A coalition of three houses. Head Boy Percy Weasley. Prefect Harry Evans. Second-year Luna Lovegood. A motley crew, with Harry as its nexus.

“He did,” Severus said. “I was not aware you had taken an interest in the hippogriff.”

Harry looked down at his food, abashed. “I would have done it just to spite Malfoy, but Monty cares about Buckbeak.”

Severus nodded, though he was unhappy. Not with the hippogriff being saved; the poor creature was merely in the way of Lucius Malfoy’s attempt at undermining Dumbledore. Once again, Lucius had made a move against Hogwarts. In acting against Malfoy, Harry had once again drawn the headmaster's attention.

They finished breakfast, Harry eating more quickly than he normally would have. Severus tried to guess his son’s mood based on how he was moving, as increasingly Harry only showed the emotions he wanted people to see. Harry did seem to act more honestly around his friends, and with Severus when their privacy was assured.

Harry gathered the used dishes, implementing yet more new spells he had learned to clear the table and do the washing up.

“You will be fine,” he said.

“I know,” Harry said. “I’m not worried about it, honestly.”

Severus raised an eyebrow, to which Harry rolled his eyes. The audacity.

“What are you doing today?” Harry asked.

“The headmaster has called a staff meeting,” Severus said, pouring himself another cup of coffee. “It should not take too long. I shall be available for dinner.”

Harry snorted. “Okay. I’ll see you then.”

Harry finished putting the dishes away, hid his muggle lunch in his robes, then left the kitchen. Severus watched Harry pat his cat on the head, throw floo powder into the fireplace, then call out the Ministry Atrium. He looked at the flames for some time, wondering if there should have been more fanfare at his son going to his first day of work.

Severus poured himself a third cup of coffee. Had Harry charmed the cafetière larger? Leaning back in his chair, he thought of his own first day at work. Almost a year after Lily's death, returning to Hogwarts, standing on the other side of the desks. People who had been in the lower years when he graduated were being taught N.E.W.T. Potions by him. A few remembered the incident after his Defense O.W.L. A few had seen it.

There hadn't been anyone to see him off, or congratulate him, or wish him luck. Had he wished Harry luck? Surely the boy didn't need it.

Perhaps he had wanted to hear it.

As there were no witnesses, Severus dropped his head onto the table.

He stayed there for a while. He knew that milestones in a child's life should be acknowledged, if not celebrated. He had given Harry the cat currently sitting on an occamy egg. The egg itself was merely payment for dealing with Lupin. Technically the school had paid for it. What else would Harry want?

Severus sat up. He would ask the boy. Perhaps something special for dinner was called for.

Checking the time, Severus realized he could no longer delay. He finished his coffee, ensured the cat was aware of her responsibilities, then flooed to Hogwarts.

Percy stood still as his mother fluttered about him.

"Oh, dear, are you sure about those robes?" she asked, near tears.

Percy held back a sigh. "Yes, mother."

She pursed her lips, tugging the green fabric down. "Well. You don't want to be late on your first day!"

Percy accepted the folded package she pushed into his hands.

"It's your lunch, dear," she said.

"Thank you, mother."

His mother gave a great sob, then pulled him down to kiss his cheek. "I'm so proud of you! Working for the Ministry, just like your father!"

Percy would have preferred if the scene hadn't occurred in the kitchen. All of his siblings were down for breakfast, and none bothered to hide how amused, disgusted, or both they were by the display. His father was too preoccupied by the *Daily Prophet* to notice.

That Buckbeak was now a free hippogriff had seemed like an auspicious start to the day. The lumpy package in his hand said otherwise.

"Father and I will be back for dinner," Percy said, pulling back from his mother's embrace.

She wiped her eyes with her apron, then gave him a watery smile.

"How will you be getting to work?" she asked, her eyes darting to the living room.

"I will be apparating," Percy said.

Fred gave an exaggerated groan.

Percy shot him a look. Fred smiled insouciantly back.

It wasn't Percy's fault he was older. No one cared when Charlie got a new broom for being made team captain, but everyone had something to say about Hermes. Now apparition was a sticking point for the twins.

"Arthur," his mother said sharply.

His father jerked, then looked up from the *Prophet*. "Yes, love?"

"It's time to go to work," she said, smiling at him. "It's Percy's first day."

His father smiled. "I know."

After some more fussing, his mother finally allowed Percy to walk into the garden, his father at his side.

"Looking forward to starting?" his father asked. "Do you know which office you'll be in?"

"Trading Standards," Percy said.

"A decent start," his father said. "Very decent. Now, you remember the apparition points?"

"I do," Percy said, ignoring the sound of the window opening. He knew his siblings had placed bets on whether he would pass his apparition test the first time. The joke was on them. He had, and last summer no less.

"I'll be waiting for you," his father said with a smile. He vanished with a crack.

Percy knew where the designated apparition areas in the Atrium were. He had pointed them out to Harry, who was too young to have a license. Percy doubted that would stop Harry.

He fixed the image of one in his mind, then spun around. He could feel as well as hear the *crack* as he was squeezed through space and time. It was a wretched sensation, and the relief

at arriving at his destination was overwhelming. Almost enough to make Percy forget what it felt like to apparate. That apparition was instantaneous was its saving grace.

“Well done, Percy,” his father said, looking him over. “Can’t have you getting splinched on your first day!”

Percy nodded, the reality of his situation hitting him full force. His first day of work. Working under Bartemius Crouch, former head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, former justice of the Wizengamot. The man who had sent Sirius Black to Azkaban without trial, though that was being kept quiet.

A man who had sent his own son to Azkaban.

Percy closed his eyes. Those were things he definitely should not say, should not even *think*, around a man in such an elevated position.

“Do you want me to introduce you around?” his father offered.

“No, thank you,” Percy said. “I know you are busy.”

“It’s not trouble,” his father said.

They joined the flow of people walking through the Atrium. The *crack* of apparition and the *whoosh* of people coming through the fireplaces, hundreds of footsteps, coworkers greeting each other; it was a dizzying cacophony. Percy looked around, hoping to spot Harry. He didn’t have a father working in the Ministry to help ease him into things. If they were working in the same department, then perhaps Percy would have been able to...

Soon they were queueing for the lifts, then packed like sardines in a tin. Level seven, Department of Magical Games and Sports. Level six, Department of Magical Transportation. That was where Harry would be. Then level five, Department of International Magical Cooperation.

“Here we are,” his father said, squeezing through the tight crowd into a corridor carpeted in rich burgundy. “Let’s see...Barty’s office is this way.”

His father started down the corridor, leaving Percy with no choice but to follow.

“I’m sure Mr. Crouch is far too busy to bother with me,” Percy said. “I’m supposed to report to—”

“Nonsense,” his father said cheerily. “Barty’s the sort who wants to know all of his staff. He’ll be delighted to meet you.”

“As you say,” Percy said quietly, looking around as they walked. He and Harry had been unable to do much exploring, despite what their badges had said. Many parts of the Ministry of Magic were not open to the public, not to mention it was a workplace and people were naturally wary of Hogwarts-aged people wandering around aimlessly. Percy was confident that Harry at least knew where everything was. They had even found a staircase, which they both agreed was more appealing than the lifts. Harry had wanted to see the Department of

Mysteries, but they only got as far as the gleaming black corridor with its single door. It was certainly mysterious.

They stopped in front of an imposing door with a gleaming plaque informing them it was the office of Bartemius Crouch Senior, the department head. Percy braced himself as his father knocked on the door.

Harry stood unmoving before a harassed looking man with thinning hair and rumpled robes.

“They told me you were a muggleborn,” Basil Montgomery, head of the Portkey Office, said. He leaned back in his chair, giving Harry a once over.

“I am, sir,” Harry assured him.

Mr. Montgomery frowned. “You’ve got muggle clothes?”

“Most of my clothes are muggle clothes,” Harry said. “I’ve lived with muggles my entire life. Except for when I’m at school.”

Mr. Montgomery nodded, then spun his chair around to look at the large world map behind his desk. Harry could barely make out anything for all the pins. “One hundred thousand people. Seven continents. Some twit got it into his head to go on holiday in Antarctica. Something about pixie penguins.”

Harry held his tongue, knowing that *twit* was Xenophilius Lovegood.

Mr. Montgomery swung back around to face him. “Construction on the stadium is finished, and the tickets are nearly sold out. We’ve got an estimated two hundred and fifty portkeys to place around Britain and Ireland, for about three thousand people. Around eight thousand five hundred portkeys worldwide. We are still getting in requests. Part of our work is creating the actual portkeys, but that’s the easy bit. We’ve got to choose locations convenient to travelers living in the same area. Departure times, arrival times. What to turn into a portkey.”

Mr. Montgomery gave him a significant look. “That’s where you come in. The squib we had on staff up and quit last week. Said she was going to work in a creche.”

Harry nodded, not knowing what to say about a squib preferring babies to portkeys.

“We need someone who knows the muggle world inside and out. We can’t charm any old thing into a portkey, or the muggles might get their hands on it. Or some creature might carry it off. Or one of those please-men might be called in. I’ve already emptied the office sending people abroad, and we need someone local.”

Mr. Montgomery sighed. “But we aren’t at that stage yet. People won’t start showing up at the campsite until two weeks before the match. Until then, we’ll be working with both

International Cooperation and Magical Games and Sports, processing domestic and international portkey requests. We need to scout locations for pick-up points. You'll be issued a Ministry broom. You know Disillusionment?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said.

"Good," Mr. Montgomery said. "It's all well and good to pick an equidistant point on a map, but we wouldn't want to send anyone to the middle of a bog, or a rubbish tip. Or worse, some muggle area."

"Right," Harry said.

Mr. Montgomery scratched his scruffy beard then stood. "We'll start you on sorting the post today. I'll introduce you to Slaw. That's Ladislaus Cram."

Harry nodded again. He was accustomed to unique names among witches and wizards, but *Slaw Cram* would take some getting used to.

He silently followed Mr. Montgomery out of the office. Sorting the post for five galleons a week? Flying across the country on a Ministry-issued broom? Even if he never made a portkey, it was decent work. Though with over eight thousand to be made, Harry was sure he'd be asked to help.

Severus did not know how long he had been sitting in the staff room. Minutes, hours, possibly days. It was the same tedium they went through at the end of every year. Choosing the Head Boy and Head Girl. Choosing the new fifth-year prefects. Identifying muggleborns, assigning people to visit the families. A courtesy not afforded to some muggle-raised students, such as a certain pair of brothers.

Severus had learned that his son had written the school that he didn't need an escort to Diagon Alley. As for why Hagrid had been sent to deal with Potter, Severus could only speculate. McGonagall would have been the better choice. Or had Dumbledore assumed that magic-fearing Petunia Dursley would tell her nephew all about the sister she hated and the world she envied?

"As you know," the headmaster said, "my duties to both our Ministry and our international community often call me away from Hogwarts."

Severus stared blankly ahead. Dumbledore would do what he wanted, and they would pick up the slack, as always.

"The ICW's conference this year is in Montevideo," the headmaster continued. "As Supreme Mugwump, I am the chief coordinator, and so I will be gone for all of this month and most of August. Minerva will be assuming my duties here at the school."

McGonagall gave the headmaster a thin smile. Dumbledore smiled warmly back.

“However, I will be in frequent contact,” the headmaster continued. “Just this morning, I received a rather compelling proposal from the Ministry.”

“Stop faffing about,” Charity muttered.

“They would like to reinstate the Triwizard Tournament,” Dumbledore said, smiling like an imbecile. “In the interest of promoting international relations. I believe it is a wonderful idea, with certain safeguards in place.”

The room was dead silent.

“That will be all for today,” Dumbledore said happily. “I’ll share with Minerva the proposal, and I hope you will all discuss it in my absence.”

Severus stayed in his seat as the room slowly emptied. Trust the headmaster to leave on a high note. The Triwizard Tournament. It was going to be another disaster of a year.

“He’s batshit,” Charity said.

Severus turned to her, and saw she was the only other person remaining.

“Yes, he is,” he said. “A death tournament is just what we need next year.”

Charity grimaced. “Couldn’t have brought the school gobstones team back, could he?” She stood, cracking her back. Severus averted his eyes, feeling oddly warm.

“Well, I’m peckish,” Charity said. “Fancy going to the Three B’s?”

Severus looked out of a window. It would be hours yet until his son arrived home.

“As you wish,” he said. “We could discuss which of our students will die this coming year. The headmaster seems committed to at least one casualty.”

“And people say you’re bad at small talk,” she replied with a smirk. “Is part of my salary going towards a tontine? It would explain some things.”

“You can take your lunch now,” Kenneth ‘Just Call Me Ken’ Jordan told Percy. Mr. Jordan, as he had learned, was Lee Jordan’s father, and Vice Chairman of the International Magical Trading Standards Body.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, his eyes drifting to the backlog of reports he was reprioritizing.

Mr. Jordan chuckled. “Those aren’t going anywhere, son.”

Percy nodded, then looked around his cubicle for the lunch his mother had made. Mr. Jordan slapped the wall of Percy's cubicle, then walked back to his office.

Percy wasn't sure where he was meant to have lunch. At his cubicle? He knew his father often ate in his office, owing to the amount of work he had. Percy was inclined to do the same.

"Percy."

He jumped, nearly knocking over one of his carefully collated stacks. Percy turned around and saw Harry grinning at him.

"What are you doing up here?" he asked.

"I thought we could have lunch together," Harry said. "You're sorting things too?"

"I am," Percy said, swallowing nervously. It was only Harry. Only Harry asking him to have lunch together.

"We could walk to the park if we hurry," Harry said, draping himself over one of the cubicle walls. "Or hide in the stairwell."

"There *is* a break room, Evans," Percy said, standing up. Hiding with Harry in a stairwell was a recipe for disaster.

"So is that a yes, Weasley?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"If you insist," Percy said. "I believe it is this way."

Percy had done his best to memorize the fifth floor during the brief tour he was given. Mr. Crouch had been too distracted for a proper introduction, but Percy was glad the esteemed man at least knew his name. Mr. Jordan was very accommodating. Percy was eager to be done with sorting the backlog reports and to begin processing them. He hadn't realized how many items were imported. Live creatures, creature parts, precious metals and gems, plants, goods and services too varied to enumerate.

He led Harry to where the break room was, a spacious chamber with a high ceiling, thick carpets in burgundy, paintings and tapestries depicting scenes from around the world. Lush valleys, majestic mountains, raging storms over oceans, vibrant jungles, misty moors, sere deserts.

"This is brilliant," Harry said quietly, walking to an open table. It was next to a picture of an intricate coral reef bursting with life. A large, striped shrimp emerged from the sand and punched a crab.

Percy sat down across from Harry and began unpacking his lunch. Harry sheepishly removed a lunchbox from his robes. Percy shook his head, and examined what his mother had made.

"What do you have?" Harry asked innocently.

Percy narrowed his eyes at Harry's tone. "Corned beef."

Harry nodded, opening his box. "I've got egg and cress. I..." Harry lightly blushed, and looked up at him. "I made it by hand, if you want to trade. I like corned beef."

Percy watched as Harry slowly nudged his lunchbox towards him. Food Harry had made by hand. Presumably using muggle ingredients.

Harry was going to be the death of him.

"I like egg and cress," Percy said quietly, pushing the sandwiches his mother had made towards Harry before he could second guess himself. Harry unwrapped one immediately and took a bite.

Percy looked into Harry's lunchbox. There was an egg and cress sandwich, a triple one no less. There were also some handfuls of bright berries that looked freshly picked. He picked up the sandwich, aware that Harry was watching him. Harry was always watching him it seemed.

He took a bite. Soft whole grain bread studded with seeds. Gently boiled eggs, seasoned just right. Smoky paprika. Bright and peppery watercress.

It was the best thing he had ever tasted.

Gulab Jamun

Chapter Summary

July 1994

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You have survived your first week of work.”

“I have,” Harry said, watching his dad curiously. He had just stepped out of the fireplace and was surprised to find his dad waiting for him.

“What would you like in exchange for this accomplishment?” his dad asked.

Harry frowned. “I don’t need anything.”

“Nevertheless,” his dad said, looking at him intently.

Lady Madeleine meowed from his dad’s armchair, which was quickly becoming *her* armchair as she kept guard of his occamy egg there.

“Okay,” Harry said, adjusting the books he held. “Can we afford muggle food?”

His dad’s brow creased. “Yes.”

“We could get takeaway,” Harry suggested. “Not here, we’d have to go somewhere. I—”

“That is acceptable,” his dad said firmly. “What are those books?”

Harry looked down at the books. “Muggle maths. It’s easy to find a midpoint between two points, or three. I need geometry for three. I’m not sure if it’s possible for more than three. It might not even exist.”

His dad frowned. “Is that necessary for your assigned task?”

“No,” Harry admitted. “But I think it’s interesting. And it’s more complicated than that anyway, because there are hills and other obstacles.”

His dad looked at the books again. “I would suggest not doing work when you are not being paid for it. You have other projects to devote your time to.”

“I know,” Harry said, walking into the kitchen. “I’m curious if arithmancy can be applied to more complicated muggle maths.”

His dad followed him and began making coffee. It was turning into a tradition for them, and Harry enjoyed the time he was able to spend with his dad in the evening.

“I am unsure if that is a fruitful line of inquiry,” his dad said. “Muggle mathematics was not necessary for the development of our society. I would suggest speaking with Professor Vector before exerting any effort. No doubt some muggleborn has had the same thought. Or Professor Burbage.”

“Professor Burbage?” Harry asked, sitting down. “She’s your friend, right?”

“She is my colleague,” his dad said, not turning around. “She assisted me with searching for the diadem. She is quite proficient in arithmancy.”

Even though his dad’s back was turned, Harry kept his face blank. He had never heard his dad speak so positively of someone before.

“Where did you acquire those books?” his dad asked.

“In the drawer of the desk I was given,” Harry said. “I think it belonged to the squib lady who quit. Jessica something.”

“She likely had muggle schooling,” his dad said, carrying the coffee to the table. “Squibs are rarely hired by the Ministry. It is difficult to work in an environment where everyone has an ability you lack.”

“I’ve met Mr. Filch,” Harry said wryly.

“There are exceptions to every rule,” his dad said, sitting down. “Squibs introduced to the muggle world late in life do not find it easy to assimilate. Even if they cannot perform magic, they can still benefit from it.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. He couldn’t imagine life without his magic. He already lived with enough grief.

“What restaurant would you like to go to?” his dad asked, shaking Harry from his thoughts.

“There was a place I saw in London I wanted to try...”

ORDER OF MERLIN RESCINDED

Percy stared at the picture of Mrs. Enid Pettigrew, Peter Pettigrew’s mother, as she tearfully returned an Order of Merlin, First Class to the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge. Minister Fudge patted the woman’s shoulder, who was mourning the loss of her son for a second time.

Percy scanned the article, feeling nauseated by the small, whimpering picture of Pettigrew embedded in one paragraph.

Former minister Millicent Bagnold has come under fire...Pettigrew's finger exhumed from the family plot...lifetime sentence in Azkaban...heightened security...

"They're still going on about that?" Ron said through a soggy mouthful of toast.

Percy glanced at his mother, whose mouth thinned. She didn't chastise Ron, though, nor comment on the article. It was his parents' decision to not tell his siblings about Pettigrew. Percy would abide by it.

The *Daily Prophet* hadn't reported anything about Sirius Black or Peter Pettigrew being animagi, so speculation as to how Black had escaped and how Pettigrew had survived was still running rampant. The Ministry had been dragged for its incompetence, for the miscarriage of justice albeit under a different administration. That had changed with the furor of the Quidditch World Cup. Most considered the Pettigrew situation over and done with. That did not hold true for those directly impacted by it.

Sirius Black. Mrs. Pettigrew. Percy Weasley.

"What's this?"

Percy looked away from the crying Mrs. Pettigrew and saw Ginny taking a jar from a cupboard.

"Oh, that's Percy's dear," his mother said, turning around to smile at her only daughter.

"Is it coffee?" Ginny asked, holding the jar up for inspection.

"Please put it back," Percy said levelly.

"Can I have some?" Ginny asked.

"No," Percy said. He would need to find another hiding place for it.

"Why not?" Ginny asked.

"It was a gift," he said, searching his robes for his wand.

"What, a gift from your girlfriend is too good for us?" Ron asked, glaring at him.

"It wasn't from Penelope," Percy said. "And it's muggle coffee. Unlike you, I cannot eat magical food limitlessly."

Ron gave him a confused look. "What are you on about?"

His mother hurried over and snatched the jar out of Ginny's hands. "It's something special for Percy, that's all you two need to know. Now, where are your brothers?"

An explosion from upstairs answered her question. She set the jar down on a counter and stormed out of the kitchen. Percy summoned the jar to himself.

"It wouldn't kill you to share," Ginny said sourly.

"In some cases it would," Percy said, taking the jar and standing up. "I'm leaving early."

"No one cares," Ron muttered.

Percy didn't respond, abandoning his breakfast to walk into the garden with his jar of instant coffee. He could keep it at his desk at work. Unlike his family, his colleagues had yet to nose around his things.

It wasn't until after he apparated that Percy realized he'd forgotten to take his lunch with him.

Harry knew in his heart it had only been a matter of time.

He watched an aggressively straightened black ponytail approach his desk, like a shark fin cutting through the water.

"Evans," Charity Lament barked, appearing at the entrance of his cubicle, wearing robes the color of dried blood. "A gobstone in the hand is worth two in the bush."

"Good morning, Captain Lament," Harry said, bowing his head, mystified by her words. He was sure they meant something in her head. What, exactly, he did not know.

Captain Lament made a displeased noise. "None of that, Evans. My captaining days are behind me. I have my sights set higher."

Harry looked up at her in surprise. "Captain?"

Captain Lament grinned sharply at him. "Team ownership. I *will* be the youngest gobstones team owner in history."

Harry sat back, impressed. "I thought you wanted to get on the Scottish team?"

Captain Lament snorted. "That was merely one step on my rise to power. In any event, they aren't looking for new players. No, I want to play *real* gobstones. The gobstones of the people. The local leagues is where it's at, Evans. They have passion, they have gumption. They know the *true* meaning of gobstones, without the lofty airs of national teams."

Harry smiled at her. “So this has nothing to do with the international tournament being postponed due to the Quidditch World Cup.”

Captain Lament punched the side of his cubicle. “How *dare* they! One day we’re arranging the preliminary rounds in Singapore, the next thing you know Ireland wins and the world goes mad! Bagman’s pulled us all off our regular jobs. I’m arranging *refreshments*! Do I look like I care whether some jumped up chaser prefers her butterbeer hot or iced?”

Harry nodded along as Captain Lament railed against the injustice of quidditch. A few lilac paper planes passed over his desk, despositing letters from the post room. More requests for portkeys he needed to sort by country and county.

“...lunch?”

Harry blinked at Captain Lament, who was still breathing heavily from her rant.

“I’m actually meeting someone for lunch,” Harry said. “I do want to talk about how the round-robin went. I think the main problem was how long it took. I can’t see it happening in nationals, but if you’re investing in an amateur league—”

“You’re a genius,” Captain Lament said effusively, her eyes shining with fervor. “When I read Avery’s report...It’s so obvious, so bloody obvious. The answer is *always* more gobstones!”

Recalling she had an actual job to do, Captain Lament gripped Harry’s hand tightly, extracting a promise to have lunch sometime in the next week, then walked away with a bounce in her step, her strict ponytail swinging menacingly.

Harry checked his watch, amazed that nearly an hour had passed. He was almost late to his lunch meeting with Percy. Harry pushed the scrolls he received to one side, glad his direct superior, Mr. Slaw Cram, was on a surveying trip to Wales.

Someone cleared their throat, and Harry spun around to see Percy in robes of midnight blue. The color made his short, coppery curls and starscape of freckles stand out. Harry particularly liked the dusting of freckles that ran across Percy’s nose, which were obscured by his glasses, revealed in rare moments of frustration when he pushed them up, or when he took them off to clean the lenses.

“Evans?”

“Yeah?” Harry said. “Oh, right. Lunch.”

Percy’s brow furrowed. “I understand if you are busy. I have come to inform you that I neglected to bring my own meal today.”

“That’s fine,” Harry said, turning back to his desk and bending down. He had gone a little overboard in ordering the night before, which his dad hadn’t commented on. His dad had only said he had lived below his means for many years, and could afford to take his son out for dinner every once in a while. “I’ve got plenty for both of us.”

Harry pulled his packed lunch from under his desk, which Percy gave a skeptical look. The container had been Harry's grandad's, more of a lunch pail than a box, black and dented from years of use.

"I haven't been in our break room yet," Harry said, standing up. Percy took a few steps back to let him pass.

"What are you working on today?" Harry asked, looking over his shoulder to make sure Percy was following. He was glad Percy didn't act self-conscious about his height. He had noticed Ron tended to hunch, which couldn't be good for his posture.

"Floo powder," Percy said.

They reached a plain door with parchment spellotaped down declaring it the break room. Mildly curious, Harry opened the door to a rather clinical room. The floor was tiled in a way that wasn't quite a pattern. It had the same charmed windows one saw throughout the Ministry, displaying a pastoral summer sky. There were simple round tables of light wood, mismatched chairs, a large icebox in a corner, some counters with kettles ready to be charmed to a boil, boxes of tea, pots of sugar and cream.

"It's very utilitarian," Percy said as they walked to a table. There were a few witches and wizards eating their own lunches or engaged in conversation over tea.

"Most people are in the field," Harry said, taking a seat. "Broom Regulatory Control is working overtime examining Ireland and Bulgaria's brooms. And the apparition examiners are always busy this time of year, so I've been told."

Harry nodded to the older witches and wizards on their lunch breaks. "They probably work for the Floo Network Authority. Speaking of which," Harry said, snapping the lid of his lunch box open. "You're working on floo powder?"

Percy sighed. "It's been...trying. The only company licensed to manufacture it is Floo-Pow, you know. They never respond to owls. Mr. Jordan sent me to their office in Diagon Alley, but they never answer the door either. The only ingredient we have on file is *floo*."

"And what is that?" Harry asked, unpacking their lunch. His lunch.

"Some sort of plant, apparently," Percy said, a touch annoyed. "I've sent an owl to Professor Sprout to see if she knows anything. The Herbological Affairs Office is at a loss. That's a subdivision of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures," Percy added, pushing up his glasses. "As you know, some plants are sentient, semi-sentient, or have creature-like behaviors."

"What's going on with floo powder?" Harry asked, setting the containers out. The warming charms had kept everything nicely heated. "Is there a shortage?"

Percy shook his head. "There has never been a shortage since its invention, and the price has been two sickles a scoop for over a century. No, the issue is there is an uptick in usage of faux-floo, and in people attempting to make illegal international floo connections." Percy

leaned forward, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Mr. Crouch suspects there is some smuggling occurring, as one of the people in St. Mungo’s has admitted to using powdered runespoor fang.”

“Can people even floo internationally?” Harry asked.

“Theoretically, perhaps,” Percy said, straightening. “As far as I know, we have no internationally connected fireplaces in Britain. Since most people have a fireplace in their home, it’s too big a security risk. Much less having one right in the heart of the Ministry. I—”

Percy stopped talking, finally noticing the food spread across the table. “What’s all this?”

“You said you’ve never had Indian food before,” Harry said, fishing around for the dishes and spoons he had packed. “I’ve only had it a few times myself. The town I grew up in doesn’t exactly have restaurants. I think the local’s the closest thing we’ve got.”

Harry glanced at Percy, worried he had gone overboard. Percy’s cheeks had gone slightly pink, and his glasses were slipping down his nose.

“What’s this?” Percy asked, pointing to a paper bag.

“Poppadoms,” Harry said. “That’s saag aloo, spinach and potato. There’s also chana masala, lamb korma, pakora, saag paneer, dal, roti...”

Percy absentmindedly licked his lips, which still tingled from the meal he shared with Harry. He could still taste the sweet syrup of rose water and saffron.

Harry had known a surprising amount about the food. Turmeric, cumin, cardamom, green chilli peppers. Percy had never eaten much food with peppers in it. It wasn’t something they grew at the Burrow, nor was it part of the meals served at Hogwarts. He’d never had lamb like that before, or much lamb at all really. He was puzzled at first by the spoon Harry had given him, but the chunks of meat had been incredibly tender, falling apart at a touch, swimming in a cashew sauce.

Harry had eaten with his hands.

Percy thought his family’s holiday in Egypt had been an eye-opening experience. And yet there was an entire world to explore only a few blocks from where he worked. He almost asked where Harry had got the food, before recalling the many different restaurants they had passed while walking through London. Then he had almost asked Harry if he had wanted to go to one together. He recalled the flavor bursting in his mouth when he crushed a cardamom pod between his teeth, Harry’s smile at his surprised expression...

Percy sighed, focusing on the papers covering his desk. He needed to finish his report for Mr. Jordan, then go down to the sixth floor to speak with Fulbert Midgen in the Floo Regulation

Panel.

He picked up his quill and began to write, wondering if he'd get to see Harry again that day.

Monty sat at his desk, staring out of his window. He watched Mrs. Figg putter down the pavement, trailed by meowing cats that he now recognized as half-kneazles. That meant Mrs. Figg was some kind of magical person, or at least knew about the magical world. It made Monty deeply suspicious. If she knew about the magical world, she knew who he was. Had known for years. Why hadn't she said anything? How did she end up living across the street from the Dursleys?

He added these questions to the letter he was writing to Harry. Monty hadn't received or sent many letters in the few weeks since school ended. Sirius had insisted they correspond regularly to keep the Dursleys in check, so Hedwig was making frequent trips to London. Luna was in Antarctica with her dad. Monty wasn't expecting anything from her. He knew Hedwig was up for a long journey, but didn't want to send her off for weeks. He could hire an owl at the Owl Post Office, if Sirius would go with him to Diagon Alley.

Sirius had been good as his word. Monty had seen him several times a week, which never failed to upset the Dursleys. Not that he cared, they were always upset about something. Sirius had admitted to having unkind feelings towards the magical world. While Monty was famous, Sirius was notorious. It was easier for both of them to stick to muggle areas, though Monty had suggested they wear disguises, which made Sirius ruffle his hair.

Monty looked out of his window again, just in time to see Mrs. Figg and her half-kneazles disappear around a corner. He had received a hired post owl from Harry, letting him know that Harry was interning at the Ministry all summer, and with the Quidditch World Cup coming up they were busier than ever. He did have weekends free, though, and Monty was tentatively looking forward to seeing at least one of his friends over the holiday.

Hermione had gone abroad with her parents. Monty knew that she missed them. He imagined being a witch with two muggle parents wasn't easy, not just for the prejudice against muggleborns, but for the growing distance between living a muggle life and living life as a witch.

Ron was with his family at the Burrow, but he hadn't written Monty yet nor invited him over. Maybe Ron didn't know he *could* invite him. Monty had realized he hadn't told anyone Sirius was his godfather, other than Luna and Neville. Neville was really good about writing, which made Monty feel guilty as he knew Neville didn't have many friends, and how he had essentially ignored the other boy for nearly three years. He had Neville to thank for his grade in Herbology.

Just as Monty was finishing his letter to Harry, the doorbell rang. The ambient noise of the television blaring and Aunt Petunia gossiping on the telephone died away. Monty hastily

rolled up the parchment, which Hedwig seized in her beak and flew off with. He raced out of his room, the door slamming shut behind him, and thudded down the stairs, just like Dudley used to do when he still slept in the cupboard. No one shouted at him to stop, and Monty smiled to himself.

He threw the door open, and was greeted by a grinning Sirius in jeans and a patched leather jacket. One thing Monty had noticed was that Sirius was really into muggle culture, which he thought had to do with Sirius' family being prejudiced against muggles. Some sort of ongoing rebellious phase.

"Ready to go, kid?" Sirius asked. "I was thinking we could go flying today. I've just got the garden at my house cleared out."

Monty's eyebrows shot up. "Your house in London?"

"Yeah," Sirius said. "It's not quite ready for habitation. Kreacher's let the place go to shit, but I've got the dining room and a few of the bedrooms ready."

"Kreacher?"

"The family house-elf," Sirius said distastefully. "Mad as a hatter. I got some advice about how to handle him. I heard you dealt with a rogue house-elf?"

"Dobby," Monty said. "I haven't seen him in ages, though."

Sirius frowned in thought. "Maybe Kreacher knows him. Run up and get your broom, let's get the fuck out of here."

Monty choked on a laugh—he *never* heard adults swear—then hurried up to his room to get his Firebolt.

Monty read the piece of paper Sirius handed him, a little disoriented from the apparation. He gasped in surprise as first a door, then walls and windows appeared between two dilapidated houses.

"Home sweet home," Sirius said wryly, opening the gate. Monty was still taking in the house. It was painted entirely black, the exterior completely spotless, and the door had a polished silver door knocker in the shape of a serpent.

"If your family hates muggles, why is your house in London?" Monty asked, following Sirius up the steps.

Sirius pulled out a wand and tapped the door with it. It sounded like a bank vault opening, clangs, rattling chains, and thuds.

“We’ve lived here longer than the muggles,” Sirius said as the door silently swung open. His voice dropped to a whisper. “Over two thousand years. We change the way the outside looks to blend in. Keep your voice down, we still haven’t worked out what to do with my mother.”

“Your mother?” Monty asked quietly. “I thought she was...”

“Dead,” Sirius said. “My mother’s portrait, I should say. She and Kreacher have only had each other’s company for years. It’s made them both worse than I remember.”

“What do you mean by *we*?” Monty asked, following Sirius down a hall lit with ornate gas lamps.

“Me and Remus,” Sirius said, leading Monty to a door at the far end of the hall. They passed a set of long velvet curtains, which Monty assumed Sirius’ mother’s portrait was concealed behind. “He’s been helping me fix the place up. It’s under Fidelius now, Dumbledore did it himself. He’s the secret-keeper.”

Monty wished he hadn’t sent his letter to Harry already. Why was Dumbledore the secret-keeper? Why not Sirius?

“You’re friends with Professor Lupin,” Monty said. “Makes sense.”

“Professor Lupin?” Sirius asked, giving Monty a bemused look. “Why don’t you call him Remus?”

Sirius pushed the door open, revealing a palatial dining room. There was a long table of dark wood, surrounded by richly cushioned chairs. The walls were lined with silver-framed portraits, and there was a large, glass-doored cabinet displaying gleaming silver and china, all bearing crests.

“I don’t know him that well,” Monty hedged, not sure how to respond.

“What do you mean?” Sirius asked, pausing next to another door.

Monty adjusted the broom on his shoulder. “I only met him last year. We’ve never really talked outside of class.”

Sirius stared at him for a moment, his expression hardening. The lights in the room flickered, and Monty winced. Should he not have said anything?

Sirius closed his eyes, taking a breath. “Alright. We can talk about that later. I need to...” He swallowed, then said, “The garden’s through the kitchen. Part of it is meant to be a kitchen garden, but Kreacher let it go with the rest of the house. You mentioned you’re friends with Neville Longbottom?”

Monty nodded, still not sure what Sirius had been so upset about.

“Maybe you two could make a project of it?” Sirius suggested, opening the door to a set of stairs. “So, through here’s the kitchen...”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your comments! You are all wonderful!

I keep writing about food when I'm hungry. It's like going to the grocery store when you're hungry, just knocking shit off the shelves.

Did anyone else watch Supermarket Sweep? When I was a kid I would have given anything to be on that show. Still would, honestly.

Cauliflower Cheese

Chapter Summary

July 1994

Harry watched in morbid fascination as Ladislaus “Slaw” Cram forked another bite of coleslaw into his mouth. The rugged man was eating it out of a large mixing bowl, clearly the bowl in which the prodigious amount of coleslaw had been made. Harry was trying not to look too closely, but it had been a long time since he’d had coleslaw. Shredded cabbage, both red and green. Carrots. Some creamy, reddish sauce. Celery seed sprinkled generously. There were even small pieces of apple.

Harry wasn’t happy to have given up his lunch time with Percy for a lunch meeting with the busy Slaw Cram, but it had rekindled his passion for coleslaw, a passion Harry hadn’t known he possessed.

Mr. Cram finished swallowing his coleslaw, then took a swig from a flask that exuded a rich, spicy fragrance. Straight firewhiskey.

“The match is sold out,” Mr. Cram said in his gravelly voice, looking up at Harry with bloodshot eyes. “We’ll likely be getting requests up until the day of, but the requisite two weeks advance notice will put people off. We’ll direct them to already established portkeys.”

Harry nodded.

Mr. Cram pulled out a handkerchief and coughed wetly into it. “We have a month until the low-end ticket holders will start arriving on site. That means we need to step it up. I’ve already started working on Wales, and I’ve got people in Ireland and Scotland. You’ll be starting south, in Cornwall and Devon.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, reigning in his excitement. The Weasleys lived in Devon. Harry didn’t know if Percy’s family was going to the World Cup, but in his letter Monty had said Mr. Weasley could usually get tickets. And Harry had seen them at the Chudley Cannons game when he had gone with Cedric. Harry wished he could excise Cedric and Amos Diggory from the memory and keep Percy in a Cannons’ shirt and prefects badge.

“You’ll need to go up to Maintenance for a broom,” Mr. Cram said. “Don’t expect anything fancy.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said.

Mr. Cram coughed again, then took another bite of coleslaw. Harry pondered which came first, the nickname or the coleslaw? Could Mrs. Weasley make coleslaw? It wasn’t that hard.

Would Percy mind if he started putting in requests?

“It’s pretty straightforward,” Mr. Cram said. “We’ve got their names. They either tell us where they live or we check the registry. The department’s on the first level, with the other Wizengamot offices. If it’s a squib, or some muggle relatives, they won’t be in the registry. You’ll need to owl them. You’ve got your map and the general drop areas picked out. Your job,” Mr. Cram said, pointing his fork at Harry, “is to scout the area, find a piece of rubbish we can use for a portkey, make a note of the location, write directions to the portkey drop spot, and add a record to our files. Be specific with the description, not everyone can identify muggle items.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mr. Cram sighed, turning back to his coleslaw. “It’s getting warm.”

Harry silently watched as Mr. Cram covered the bowl with a gingham cloth and cast an alarming number of spells to ensure no one tampered with it. He carried it to the icebox in the breakroom and carefully placed it inside. He sat back down and gave Harry a searching look.

“Do you know how portkeys work?”

“An object is charmed to transport someone from one location to another,” Harry said.

Mr. Cram grunted. “That’s the gist of it, but too simple. I don’t blame you, Evans, the Ministry keeps a tight lid on who knows how to actually make portkeys. Can you imagine if some pillock went around turning everything into portkeys? It’d be chaos, and Accidents and Catastrophes already has their hands full. You might learn what a portkey *is* at Hogwarts, plenty of people use them through us. The spell’s beyond most people.”

Harry’s hopes to learn how to make portkeys were thusly dashed, but he kept his expression curious. “So what are they?”

Mr. Cram frowned. “Apparition is a bit like punching a hole from one point to another. There’s no in between. For floos there is, you see all the other grates, yeah?”

“Right,” Harry said. “A portkey’s kind of like a magnet? Or a summoning charm?”

Mr. Cram shrugged. “Basil’s better at explaining these things. Hold on.”

He dug around in his robes and pulled out a wrinkled pamphlet. “This’ll give you a run-through. Portkeys are great, but they’re dodgy as anything if you cock it up.”

Mr. Cram stood, patting around his robes and pulling out a pipe. He stuck it into his mouth. “You read that. Got any questions, come to me.”

He knocked on the table then walked off. Harry watched Mr. Cram leave, then picked up the pamphlet. *What Is A Portkey?* Amused, Harry opened it up.

While he was reading, a paper plane flew into the break room and landed in front of him. Harry grinned when he saw a packed lunch had been tied to it. He picked up the plane and

unfolded it.

Evans

The interdepartmental memo system is not meant to be used for food delivery. They are strictly for information relevant to Ministry work. I would also like to remind you that extension charms are subject to Ministry regulation.

Weasley

PS I hope you like cauliflower cheese

Harry carefully opened up the bag Percy had sent and found a pot inside. There were even crispy bits on top, which he wagered were made from Mrs. Weasley's homemade bread. He didn't think he'd have time in the morning to make all that for Percy.

He felt a little guilty eating food intended for Mrs. Weasley's son, but was also frustrated that she didn't seem to be accommodating him. He had asked Percy what the kitchen at the Burrow was like. Magical, obviously. No electricity or gas for the hob, and even if Percy managed to make his own food, all the ingredients were saturated with magic. Harry was happy his dad wasn't the kind to make his own cheese with milk from his own cows, and that their greenhouse was largely devoted to potions ingredients. All of their food was muggle, even if they used magic to put it together.

Harry took the pot from the bag. He doubted their lunch swaps would get back to Mrs. Weasley. If it ever did, he hoped she wouldn't mind.

Monty could see Mrs. Figg's house from his bedroom window. There were a few half-kneazles in the yard. He knew that they roamed the entire neighborhood. He had even seen one in the Dursleys' garden—his garden, it was his home too—a few times. Now he could only think of them as undercover agents.

Frowning, Monty picked up the letter Harry had sent back with Hedwig.

This is what I know.

Mrs. Arabella Figg is a squib who breeds half-kneazles. She also works for Dumbledore in some capacity. I would guess her job is spying on you. I got Lady Madeleine from her, I hope that doesn't make you upset. She's a good cat.

Be careful with how you act, you don't want her to know that you know.

I don't know how long she's lived there, probably since you have. Maybe ask your aunt. She's the type to know everything about her neighbors, right?

What's interesting about squibs is the Ministry doesn't keep records of them. That means she knows about the magical world, but the magical world doesn't know about her.

What gave the headmaster the right to put you with the Dursleys and assign someone to spy on you? I don't know. Powerful people can do whatever they want. Who would stop him?

It's good you're able to see Mr. Black so frequently. Being stuck in the muggle world after being at Hogwarts is like being in purgatory, I know. He might know about Mrs. Figg. If she's one of Dumbledore's, she might have been in the Order of the Phoenix. That was Dumbledore's secret organization during the war. It's not something many people know about, and it would honestly be really suspicious if you referred to it by name. You could ask Mr. Black how your parents got involved in the war. I bet he has loads of stories. The Order was a vigilante group. They were in the streets, fighting Death Eaters.

There are other magical shopping areas besides Diagon Alley, you know. Nothing as big as it, but most magical villages have a few shops.

I doubt Mr. Black will care if you practice magic wherever he lives. He helped make the Map, remember? Keep that in mind.

I'm being sent into the field next week. I'll be flying around southern England, picking out places to leave portkeys. I was thinking, would you like to come? I've got special permission to use magic in the course of my Ministry duties, though they track the spells. I can cast a Disillusionment on your broom, and you've got your cloak.

PS Show this note to your aunt. Let me know if she can see it.

Monty picked up the slip of paper Harry had included, which had a drawing of a thestral on it. Puzzled, Monty left his room and sought his aunt out. She was in the kitchen, preparing a sumptuous lunch of celery stalks and carrot sticks.

“What is it?” she asked, slicing the carrots thinner.

“Can you see this?” Monty asked, holding up the drawing.

Aunt Petunia looked over, narrowing her eyes. Her eyes zeroed in on Monty, and she gave him a nasty look.

“Don't waste my time showing me blank pieces of paper,” she snapped. “And tell Dudders lunch is almost ready.”

“Yes, Aunt Petunia,” Monty said, turning around so she couldn’t see his smile. Had Harry spelled it so muggles couldn’t see? Curious, he hurried back up to his room, remembering to kick Dudley’s door and shouting loud enough so he could be heard over Mega-Mutilation Part Three.

Back at his desk, he was tempted to close his curtains, but was wary of alerting Mrs. Figg. Monty couldn’t believe how awful she had been to him over the years. Not as bad as the Dursleys, nowhere near, but she hadn’t exactly made his time with her pleasant. Monty would have done anything for just one person in the world to be nice to him. She had let him watch television once, but only because she was stuck in bed with a broken leg and couldn’t actively torture him with endless cat pictures.

He wouldn’t hold Lady Madeleine’s heritage against her.

Monty pulled a fresh sheet of parchment from his desk, then tapped his quill idly. He definitely wanted to go flying with Harry. Flying around Grimmauld Place was fun, and the garden was large enough to have its own pitch, but it would be fantastic to travel.

He looked out of the window again. Had Mrs. Figg’s curtains twitched?

Monty shuddered, looking back at the blank parchment. Maybe Sirius knew a spell for privacy. He knew Sirius wouldn’t tell the headmaster if he asked him not to. Monty *hoped* he wouldn’t. Then again, Sirius had a short temper, and if he learned Monty was being spied on...

He put his head in his hands, gripping his hair. Where did the headmaster get off on sending some old lady to spy on him and treat him like shit? And what kind of spy didn’t know he had been sleeping in a cupboard for a decade? Or didn’t say anything when he got locked out of the house, or when he was made to work in the garden for hours? Or when Dudley and his friends were chasing him and beating him up? Or how his clothes never fit, or...anything. Everything. All Mrs. Figg did was watch. Had she seen it all? Had she told Dumbledore? Did Dumbledore know what the Dursleys were like? Did he even care?

The window exploded outward.

Monty sat up, stunned, listening as shards of glass fell to the sidewalk below. Dudley paused his game. The house became eerily silent.

“Shit,” he said, pulling out his wand. Underage magic. It was an accident, but did the Ministry care? They hadn’t with Dobby, not until someone intervened. He looked at the wand in his hand. If he tried to fix it, he’d only make it worse. His aunt and uncle would be furious.

Monty squeezed his eyes shut. Sirius could come fix it for him. It was so stupid. If he lived with an adult witch or wizard he wouldn’t have to care at all. Instead he was stuck at Privet Drive.

Scowling, Monty set his wand down and scrawled a quick note to Sirius, hoping his godfather was free to help out. He could already hear his aunt stomping up the stairs to shout

at him.

It wasn't fair.

How long had Harry known? Since he got Lady Madeleine at least. For that matter, *how* did Harry know? Why hadn't Harry told him sooner?

As the pounding on his door began, Monty let out a frustrated sigh. He looked at his shattered window. Maybe it was because Harry knew how he'd react.

Monty angrily signed the note. Hedwig snatched it up before the ink was dry and took off like a lightning bolt. He stood up and went to deal with his aunt. How would *she* react if she learned the neighbors she spied on were spying on them as well?

Hiding a grin, Monty unlocked his door.

"What would you like for your birthday?"

Harry didn't look up from the *Evening Prophet*. "A mandrake leaf."

Severus waited very patiently for his son to explain himself. Seconds passed.

"I want to become an animagus," Harry said, not batting an eye.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because it's cool," Harry said, finally looking up. "And useful. And I'm worried Luna might do something reckless. Monty's got Mr. Black to look after him if he wants to become an animagus. I think Mr. Lovegood is too out of touch to notice if Luna tries it."

Severus closed his eyes. "Why do you insist on using titles?"

"It's funny," Harry said, turning a page. "And Sirius hates it."

Severus gritted his teeth.

Harry glanced at him, doing a poor job of hiding his grin. "I'll call him Black around you."

"A mandrake leaf," Severus said. "That is easily procured."

"It is."

"You wish to become an animagus."

"Yes."

“Presumably without registering with the Ministry?”

Harry sighed, lowering the paper. “There’s no use if everyone knows you can do it. Unless you just want to show off, like Professor McGonagall.”

For something to do, Severus began gathering their used dishes. Harry had made cauliflower cheese the muggle way. Severus knew about the Weasley boy’s condition. He hadn’t seen them correspond since summer began, but he could guess his son was going to such efforts for the older boy’s sake. Perhaps he could contrive to have some business in the Ministry. Which department did Weasley work in?

“It is reckless to do such a thing at your age,” he said, charming the dishes to wash themselves. He regularly used domestic charms. They were becoming second nature.

“If a shit for brains like Pettigrew can do it—”

“I am not doubting your capability,” Severus said, turning back to his son. “The Ministry closely monitors those attempting the transformation to avoid disaster. As you said, should your brother choose to make the attempt, Black is capable of overseeing the process. Unless you wish to approach Black yourself, you do not have that luxury.”

“So I shouldn’t do it at all?” Harry asked, his brow furrowing. He looked so much like Lily sometimes. Seeing her expressions on his face...

“I did not say that,” Severus pointed out. “Merely that it would be wise to have supervision.”

“Then who?” Harry asked. “I don’t mind asking Black, he owes me one.”

Sirius Black, teaching *his* son magic? Out of the question.

“I shall embark on this journey with you,” he declared.

Harry stared at him. “You what?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Your birthday is on a full moon.”

Harry nodded.

“You waited until now to make this request. You could have pursued this on your own, without informing me.”

His son looked down. “You said you wanted to know about my life.”

There was a strange feeling in Severus’ chest. He ignored it. “I admit that being an animagus has its uses. It would be no hardship to become one as well.”

Harry looked up again, giving him a tentative smile. “I’d like that.”

The strange feeling in Severus’ chest increased, and he turned away to prepare coffee. He heard his son pick up the paper again, and the evening proceeded as usual.

Harry had a quest. He wanted to see all of the Ministry's break rooms. However, he doubted he would be having lunch at work again that summer. There were also some parts of the Ministry he wanted to avoid. The Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures on level four, where Amos Diggory worked. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement on level two, where Percy's dad and the aurors worked. The bedlam in the Department of Magical Games and Sports on level seven, though he had gone to lunch with Captain Lament once. There were a lot of quidditch posters, which Charity was slowly but steadily replacing with gobstones propaganda.

The International Cooperation break room was nice. It did a good job of making one forget they were underground, and it was so richly appointed that it made it clear Bartemius Crouch hadn't lost all status after his son had been exposed as a Death Eater.

Harry had unearthed a ceramic baking dish, one of his gran's, in which he had created cauliflower cheese. He thought it tasted pretty good. He propped his head on a hand, watching the denizens of the coral reef tapestry. One scallop had moved to the foreground, and Harry could make out little blue dots among its cilia. Eyes, Harry was certain of it. Seeing the shellfish up close, Harry did not particularly mind his allergy.

"I apologize for keeping you waiting," Percy said brusquely, taking a seat.

"Still on floo powder?" Harry asked, smiling at his frazzled friend.

Percy sighed in exasperation. "We're running an announcement in the *Daily Prophet*, I've just been revising the copy. Mr. Jordan has already made contact with our international allies, but has intimated that he doubts the imprudence will cease before the World Cup."

"You wrote something for the *Daily Prophet*?" Harry asked, leaning forward.

The tips of Percy's ears went red. "I have, yes. It will be published next week."

"I can't wait to read it," Harry said.

Percy swallowed, and Harry's eyes were drawn to the motion.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to stay long today," Percy said.

Harry's eye snapped back up. "That's alright. Actually, there's something I need to tell you. I'm going out on the field next week, so I won't be able to make it for lunch anymore."

Percy was silent for a moment, his expression unreadable.

"I see," he said. "It is good you are being given more diverse tasks. That speaks well to your ability."

“It’s my ability to fly for hours I’m worried about,” Harry said, sitting back. “What’s on the menu today?”

“My mother created a ham sandwich,” Percy said. “The pig was raised at the Burrow.”

“You mean you helped?” Harry said, sliding the baking dish over. Percy glanced at it.

“Indirectly,” Percy said faintly. “Is this…”

“It’s cauliflower cheese,” Harry said. “It’s the first time I’ve made it, but it’s not that hard. I think it turned out alright.”

“I am sure it is delicious,” Percy said. “Everything you make is.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, mastering his emotions. He could handle a compliment from Percy. No problem. “Anyway, since we can’t meet for lunch, maybe we could have dinner?”

Percy went completely still. Harry knew Percy was embarrassed, he could see Percy’s ears go completely red, but he didn’t look away. He didn’t know if Percy was oblivious, or simply kind. He didn’t dare hope for more.

“That…would be acceptable,” Percy said tonelessly.

A ringing endorsement, if Harry ever heard one.

Perfect Examples

Chapter Summary

July 1994

A club crashed into Heliotrope Willis, spokeswitch for the Troll Rights Movement, sending the woman flying out of the picture. Percy sipped his coffee, ignoring the petulant looks Ginny kept giving him, as he read through the *Sunday Prophet*. In support of Liechtenstein's proposal to the ICW, yet another attempt to restrict the movement of trolls, an anti-troll rally had been held and subsequently disrupted by trolls and pro-troll activists. It had rapidly descended into a riot, precipitated by the accidental clubbing of the trolls' own spokeswitch.

Mr. Crouch spoke Troll, and was one of few people without troll heritage who did. This communication barrier impeded the Troll Rights Movement, so activists claimed. Watching as Heliotrope Willis was pummeled, it was clear things were more complicated than that. Mrs. Willis was in the position of advocating for the rights of a people who generally regarded her as food. Interrupting a rally in Liechtenstein with armed trolls, given Liechtenstein's long standing issues with troll violence, was a poor idea.

Percy set the paper down and confronted his breakfast. There would be a roast later. Harry had liked the leftovers from the previous Sunday. Would he be looking forward to a repeat? He was able to enjoy Percy's mother's cooking, without having to worry about the cost.

After a few short weeks Percy had become accustomed to sharing his lunches with Harry. Now preparations for the Quidditch World Cup were ramping up, and Harry was being sent into the field to scout portkey locations. Percy would miss their discussions. What was Harry's opinion on troll rights? He had killed a troll in self-defense, though that had been three years prior. Now that he was older, would he attempt to restrain the troll instead?

He idly reheated his coffee. Harry had killed a troll. A person, though their status as Beings had been downgraded to Beast. And it *was* a downgrade, as trolls could be hunted for sport. Legally, all Harry had done was euthanize a rabid animal. Somehow, he doubted Harry saw it that way. Trolls had names, families, language, culture. He suspected Harry didn't like trolls, possibly due to his first encounter with one, but Percy didn't think Harry would want them denied a right to exist.

A wooden spoon clattered to the floor, and Percy looked over to see his mother staring out of the window, clutching her chest. Percy followed her gaze and saw two small figures flying towards them.

"What is it, dear?" his father asked.

His mother had been rendered speechless, and Percy saw her face was tight with worry.

“O.W.L.s,” he said shortly, glancing at Fred and George. Fred grinned at him, which made Percy immediately suspicious. George rolled his eyes.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” George muttered, looking at their mother, who was eagerly waiting by the window.

Percy frowned. The twins had done the bare minimum to stay in school. They had no interest in formal education, and had always pursued their own interests. Anyone who expected anything else didn’t know them very well.

Two school owls landed in front of Fred and George.

“Even the owls know who’s who,” Fred said, untying his letter from the owl’s upraised leg.

Their mother tutted, bustling around the table to watch Fred and George open their results. The twins exchanged a look, their expressions shifting from apprehensive to wicked glee as they tore the envelopes open.

Percy’s stomach coiled with worry. He had no idea how any of his younger siblings would fare in the larger world. What were his brothers going to do after Hogwarts? Did they have a plan at all? There were plenty of jobs they could do, even without O.W.L.s. Maybe they could work at Zonko’s, they’d like that.

The kitchen was completely silent, save for the sound of Ron chewing.

“More than I thought we’d get, Georgie,” Fred said.

“And we’ve still got two classes together,” George said.

“Shame about Potions,” Fred said. “We’ll have to—”

“*Shame about Potions*,” their mother said icily.

Fred and George flinched, both turning to look up at their mother. She snatched their O.W.L. results from their hands, brandishing them.

“Three O.W.L.s!” she shouted. “Three! After everything we’ve done for you boys! How are you going to get into the Ministry now?”

Percy cleared his throat. “They could work in Magical Mainte—”

“Your brother,” she said passionately, “has *twelve* O.W.L.s! And you couldn’t even manage *half* of that! Five years of schooling, and this is the result?”

Fred and George both looked unconcerned, but Percy saw the tension around their eyes.

“It’s better than nothing,” Fred said lightly.

Their mother spluttered. Ginny scooted her chair away from Fred's, out of the line of fire.

"Better than nothing," she repeated. "Is that the standard then?"

"Mum," George said, "it's not a big deal."

"Not a big deal!" she shrieked. "Arthur!"

Their father shifted uncomfortably. "What did you boys get O.W.L.s in?"

"Defense, Transfiguration, and Charms," Fred told him.

"Defense, Transfiguration, and Herbology," George said with a smile.

"There you go," their father said, smiling at their mother.

She glared at him. "Arthur!"

Their father sighed. "Perhaps we can discuss this later."

"What's there to discuss?" George asked. "It's not like we can retake them."

Their mother stormed back to the sink, the fallen spoon leaping from the floor and hitting her hand with an ominous slap.

"It will be fine," their father said quietly. "I'm proud that you boys managed to get as many as you did."

"Thanks, dad," Fred said flatly, pushing his eggs around.

George shrugged and began picking at his scone.

Their mother fumed at the sink, bracing her hands on the counter. Percy saw her wipe frustrated tears away then square her shoulders.

"I don't see what the problem is," Ron said, having continued to eat during the altercation.

Percy picked up his paper again. "Shut up, Ron."

"You shut up."

Shaking his head, Percy flipped to the Ministry's press releases. His mood immediately lightened when he found it.

FLOO POWDER MISHAPS: THE FACTS YOU NEED TO KNOW

“They’ve just published my report,” Percy said, pleased at how quickly it had been released. What would Harry think of it?

“What report?” his father asked.

“On the dangers of floo powder,” he said neutrally. Percy had talked about it before. He tried not to feel hurt that his father didn’t remember.

“Good for you,” Fred said, rolling his eyes.

“What dangers?” Ginny asked.

“You can read it in the paper,” Percy said.

“They published something *you* wrote?” Ron asked skeptically.

“Yes,” Percy said, ignoring the jab. “It’s my job.”

“That’s wonderful, Percy,” their mother said effusively. She ruined it by adding, “At least I can be proud of one of my children!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” George demanded, standing up. “Being good at school isn’t the only thing worth doing!”

“Don’t talk back to me!” their mother snapped, reeling around. “Not after O.W.L.s like that!”

“Sorry we can’t all be perfect like Percy,” Fred said, also standing.

“All you ever do is nag at us,” George said harshly, clenching his fists. “Has it occurred to you that we don’t *want* to work at the Ministry?”

“Boys,” their father began, looking worriedly at his sons.

“Go to your room!” their mother shouted.

“Fine!” the twins shouted back, storming off together. Percy heard them pound up the stairs, then the slam of their door. Their mother burst into tears, and their father hurriedly stood to comfort her.

“I’m eating in my room,” Ginny declared, taking her plate and running off.

“Good idea,” Ron said, grabbing a few more things before following her.

Percy avoided looking at his parents, who were now talking in hushed voices, picked up his coffee and *Sunday Prophet*, and left the kitchen. He could already hear the twins crashing around in their own room, the sound of the wireless in Ginny’s room, the ghouls banging on the pipes. He could sit in the garden and wonder how George got an O.W.L. in Herbology of all things. And Fred had one in Charms. That meant they were unusually interested in those subjects. The question was *why*.

What were they up to?

The Fountain of Magical Brethren was offensive. It was large, it was gaudy, it was an ode to wizard supremacy. A goblin would never look at a wizard with such adoration, nor would a centaur. The house-elf was the most authentically portrayed, but unlike the goblins and centaurs, house-elves were magically compelled to act so obsequiously. Centaurs avoided all human contact, and the goblins wouldn't hesitate to start another war if the Ministry pushed them too far.

Harry didn't like waiting next to the fountain, but he wanted to catch Percy early. It had already been an hour, and Harry had begun to realize that perhaps he had been a bit too early, when he heard the faint *crack* of apparition at the end of the Atrium.

He casually looked over, the portrait of indifference, not expecting to see Percy quite yet. The Ministry never really closed. He had seen a few aurors, some maintenance workers, and even a few people he thought were Unspeakables.

It was Percy.

Percy, in flattering robes of dark green that brought out the traces of green in his hazel eyes. Not that Harry could see that from such a distance, or had ever made such an observation in the past.

Percy had taken to carrying a briefcase. He held a mug in one hand, and the *Daily Prophet* was tucked under his arm. Percy had apparated with a full cup of coffee, and hadn't spilled a drop. The precision that took...

"Good morning, Evans," Percy said, nodding to him. "I see you're in early."

"Yes," Harry said.

Percy waited for him to continue. Up close, he looked tired.

"Congratulations on your press release," Harry said, regaining his senses. "It was very well-written. I've sent it to someone I know who has trouble with flooing."

"Thank you," Percy said. "I am pleased with the results, though I am worried the troll article will have claimed more attention."

Harry began walking towards the lifts. He didn't want to make Percy stand around the Atrium forever. "Have you thought about posting notices near public floo access?"

"I have," Percy said. "I'm unsure how effective it will be. People tend to ignore signs."

“It depends on how noticeable it is,” Harry said. “Maybe you could commission a graphic image of one of the floo mishaps.”

“I wouldn’t want a child to see such a thing,” Percy said, pressing the call button. “They are rather gruesome. You are beginning your field work today?”

“I am,” Harry said, reaching into his robes. He pulled out a paper bag. “I’ve got this for you. It’s only ham and cheese, I was in a rush this morning.”

Percy looked at the sack lunch, then down at all the things he was holding. “Thank you.”

Harry felt like an idiot and lowered his arm. “I’ll just...I can walk with you to your desk. How was your weekend?”

Percy frowned. “My brothers received their O.W.L. results.”

“Manfred and Georgius,” Harry said as the lift arrived.

Percy’s lips twitched. “Mother was not pleased with the outcome.”

“That bad?” Harry asked. They walked onto the lift and he pressed the button for level five.

“Father is of the opinion we should be grateful they received any at all,” Percy said drily.

“I’m guessing that didn’t go over well,” Harry said.

Percy snorted. “Mother is refusing to speak to him.”

The lift shuddered to a halt, catching Harry off guard. He had forgotten to brace himself or hold onto anything, too distracted by his proximity to Percy. He stumbled, and to his mortification Percy dropped his briefcase to catch him.

“Are you alright, Evans?” Percy asked, his arm tightening around Harry’s shoulders.

Harry forced himself to respond. “I’m fine, thanks. Sorry.”

The lift’s grille slid back, and Percy released him. Harry retrieved the briefcase from the floor, distracting himself by wondering what was inside of it.

“Sorry,” he repeated. Percy’s elegant fingers brushed his as he reclaimed his briefcase, and Harry looked up to see a faint blush on Percy’s freckled cheeks. He tried not to read anything into it, but it made his heart race.

“It’s fine,” Percy said, not looking at him.

They were still in the lift, the door gaping open.

“We should get off,” Harry suggested.

Percy cleared his throat. “I agree.”

It wasn't until Harry was walking through Magical Maintenance, carrying a Bluebottle spelled so he could fly unseen among muggles, replaying his conversation with Percy as he often did, that it hit him.

He stopped walking, drawing a complaint from some secretary or another who pushed past him. He wished he could sink into the floor. Harry was almost glad he wasn't going to see Percy for lunch. He didn't think he could look him in the face. He'd die on the spot.

Shaking his head, Harry continued to the lifts. He had a job to do.

Severus swept through the castle. Where was the blasted thing? He had already torn Spinner's End apart, and while he could recreate his old potions book from scratch, he had only a day left. He had his backup present, of course, and Harry could receive the book at a later point. His son wouldn't mind, he wasn't a greedy child.

Child. His son was swiftly leaving that time of his life behind. Severus felt strange at having missed so much of Harry's earlier years. His first words. His first steps. When he learned to read. He had one picture of his son. One, given to him by Harry himself. Were there more? He wanted to see his son growing up, from the beginning.

Severus scowled. When had he become such a sentimental fool?

What had he done with that damn book? He tried to think back on his sixth year. Most of it was a blur. His friendship with Lily had been over. Those whose families had allied with the Dark Lord became more insular. The aurors were permitted to use Unforgivables. News of attacks. Coming of age. Throwing himself into schoolwork, into potions. Wishing he could literally throw himself into a potion for ruining the one good thing in his life, the one constant. Dark arts and careless experimentation.

He knew he had the book at the end of that year. He would not have been so stupid as to leave it lying around where any moron could get their hands on it.

Severus reached the seventh floor, glad the headmaster was in Uruguay. That man showed up in the most inconvenient places. The only witness to his desperation was a tapestry with several ungainly trolls *en pointe*. He turned away from it and paced in front of the wall Harry had described, thinking of a very specific copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. On his third pass, a door appeared. Severus opened it, then closed his eyes. Of course.

It was the corner cupboard from one of the dungeon classrooms. The one Slughorn had taught his N.E.W.T. classes in. The cupboard where extra copies of assigned texts were kept. And there, in all of its faded glory, was his old book.

Of course it would be there. Some helpful house-elf probably found it and placed it with the rest.

He could have asked the house-elves.

Weeks of intermittent searching. He would never hear the end of it if Harry learned.

Severus snatched the book out of the cupboard and shut the door. He needed to break into the greenhouse next. The fresher the mandrake leaf, the better. For his son, he would settle for nothing less than perfect.

Monty finished his letter to Neville, accepting his friend's invitation to his birthday party. That Neville lived in a manor house was somewhat intimidating, but given the dozens of relatives he regularly talked about, Monty wasn't surprised.

Sirius had shown him the Black family tapestry, and Monty had spotted a marriage into the Longbottom family several generations back. He had even seen his own name on there, and his dad's, though his mum's was conspicuously absent. Sirius' mother had routinely burned off squibs, blood traitors, and mudbloods—her portrait's words in defense of her behavior.

He tied the letter to Hedwig's leg. Neville lived in Yorkshire, and she would likely need to hunt during such a long flight. Monty didn't mind if she took her time.

Seeing the tapestry had been overwhelming. Monty knew from a glance that the magical community was small, so it made sense a lot of people were distantly related. Even him. There was proof, seven hundred years of it in Sirius' drawing room. Monty had living magical relatives. Him and Ron were cousins of some kind. Him and *Malfoy* were cousins of some kind. He was famous, he was sure anyone, no matter how negligible the relation, would have taken him in. What about his parents' friends?

Would I have even been allowed to raise you?

But his mum was a muggleborn. Her only blood relative was Aunt Petunia. What if it had been the other way around, and Aunt Petunia had been murdered? Would Monty's mum have shoved Dudley under the sink? Lied about Aunt Petunia being a junkie?

Sirius wasn't happy about the situation either, and they avoided talking about it. He was mad at Professor Lupin too, something about never having contacted Monty. Monty hadn't been able to completely follow Sirius' rant, but he gathered Professor Lupin was now spending the summer with his father in Wales. Sirius had said as much when he showed up to fix Monty's shattered window, and to write a scathing reply to Mafalda Hopkirk.

Not a single person had given Sirius the benefit of the doubt. Not the headmaster, not his oldest friend, not his own mother whose portrait screeched about Sirius being a blood traitor whenever she was roused. No one, except Harry.

Why Harry of all people? It would make sense if Sirius was his dad, that he'd want to think his dad wasn't a mass-murdering traitor. Why did Harry care about Sirius at all? Monty couldn't help but wonder *who* Harry's Death Eater parent was. Sirius' brother had been a Death Eater. So was his cousin Bellatrix Lestrange, who was in Azkaban. She was the one who had tortured Neville's parents. Monty had read about it. Neville never talked about his parents, and Monty didn't want to ask. But she was married to Rodolphus Lestrange. Where had the name *Evans* come from?

Monty put his head on his desk. Maybe if he got better at occlumency Harry would tell him. It couldn't be *that* bad, unless his dad was Voldemort or something. Even then, that wouldn't be Harry's fault. Just like it wasn't Lady Madeleine's fault she had been born to one of Mrs. Figg's duplicitous half-kneazles.

He looked at a calendar Sirius had bought him, one with different types of dragons for each month. July was the Common Welsh Green. How *common* was it, exactly? The painted dragon was snapping at a few painted birds flying by. Monty checked the date, then sat bolt upright. Harry's birthday.

He looked out of the window, but Hedwig was long gone. Monty pulled open his desk and looked for the letter Harry had sent, in which he said Monty didn't have to burn their letters anymore, except as a last resort. A last resort for *what* Harry hadn't specified, but Monty had long since accepted that the older boy was paranoid.

Harry's birthday was on one of the days Sirius usually showed up, and they were meeting Harry at the Leaky Cauldron. It seemed the location of portkeys was a security issue, so while Harry couldn't technically have laypeople following him around, if they happened to run into each other that was nobody's fault.

Harry hadn't mentioned it being his birthday at all, as if it were just another day. But Monty *knew* it was Harry's birthday, he couldn't just give him nothing.

He had to get Neville a present too. A plant maybe?

As for Harry...

Monty looked around his room, landing on his trunk. He jumped up and threw the lid open. There it was, right on top of everything else. It was perfect!

Percy sat quietly on his bed, eyes never leaving his pocket watch. He had waited until he heard his mother finally go to bed, then waited an extra hour to make sure she was asleep. Fred and George's room had been silent since their mother threatened to clean it. The twins might think they were being sneaky with their experimentation—how the others could write it off as simply noise was baffling—and Ginny with her breaking into the broomshed, but

Percy had grown up at the Burrow too. What his siblings had in stealth they lacked in subtlety. A simple sleeping draught slipped into that evening's tea was all it took.

Hermes sat on his windowsill. Watching. Waiting.

Percy picked up his wand, cast a few spells, and silently left his room.

The fire in the living room had burned down. The garden gnomes were asleep in their holes. The kitchen was empty.

He picked up *Enchantment in Baking*, checking the time once again. He already knew what he wanted and flipped directly to the recipe. He set the book on a counter and took out his wand. Percy bent down, his glasses flashing as he lit the oven.

It had to be perfect.

Platonic Pudding

Chapter Summary

July 1994

Chapter Notes

If you haven't heard of sweet tea, let me tell you it is extremely fucking sweet iced tea. I have to get half sweet, half unsweet, or just add water to it. I feel like a hummingbird right now.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY HARRY!

There was an explosion that shook the house. Harry scrambled out of bed, reaching for his wand as fireworks lit up his room. Lady Madeleine yowled and fled from the room, crashing down the hallway.

SORRY, DID I WAKE YOU UP? Astrid's voice boomed. Harry groaned, then buried his face in his giant swooping evil plush, which gave a consoling shriek.

TO ANY MUGGLES LISTENING IN, MIND YOUR OWN FUCKING BUSINESS.

Yeah, mind your own fucking business!

MHAIRI, YOU AREN'T ALLOWED TO USE THAT WORD!

Happy birthday, Harry! Mhairi sang.

HOW DID YOU EVEN GET IN MY ROOM? ANYWAY, I HAD TO BREAK OUT OF CAMP TO SEND YOUR PRESENT, SO I DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME.

I'm telling mum!

I'M TELLING DAD YOU'RE UP PAST YOUR BEDTIME!

No!

YES!

No! No! No!

YES! YES! YES!

Harry lit a few candles as the sororal argument went back and forth. He looked around for whatever Astrid had sent with her birthday howler, finding a small package that looked wrapped in pages ripped out of *Quidditch Times*. Harry turned the package over, trying to read the article hidden beneath Astrid's annotations.

Puddlemere United signed several new players, including a chaser named Wilda Griffiths from the Holyhead Harpies. Puddlemere had crushed the Wigtown Wanderers, Mhairi's favorite team based on the shouting match happening in his room, in their first match with Griffiths.

Oliver Wood had been signed to Puddlemere as a reserve keeper. It was obvious which bothered Astrid more.

YOU HAVE TO READ THE BOOK BEFORE WEARING THE WIGS SHIRT!

You have to!

DON'T BE A POSER!

I don't know what that means, Ash.

I DON'T EITHER!

Shaking his head, Harry opened up his birthday presents. The first was a book, *The Wonder of the Wigtown Wanderers*. The second, a blood red shirt with a meat cleaver. The blade gleamed as the cleaver was violently swung at an invisible opponent. Harry wasn't exactly sure what a meat cleaver had to do with wigs or wandering, or why Astrid and Mhairi's teams were so meat-based, but he supposed he'd have to read the book to find out.

Checking the time and finding it just after midnight, Harry flopped back onto his swooping evil. He watched the fireworks sputter out until he fell asleep.

Harry woke again at dawn to an owl rapping on his window and a sharp pain in his gut. He clenched his teeth and pushed himself up, shuffling to the window to allow Hermes in.

He blinked a few times, rubbing his eyes to make sure he wasn't seeing things. But no, it was Percy's screech owl in his room at dawn, with a package securely tied to his leg.

Pain temporarily forgotten, Harry untied the package. Lady Madeleine wove between his legs.

"You're supposed to be egg sitting," Harry said to her, absently stroking Hermes' breast feathers. To Hermes he said, "If you stick around, you can have breakfast with us."

Hermes nipped Harry's finger, then settled down on his bedside table.

Harry climbed back onto his bed with the package. He paused in removing the attached note. "Percy's birthday is exactly a month after mine."

Hermes clacked his beak.

Blushing, Harry opened the note.

Dear Harry

Harry stopped reading. Was he seeing things? He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling a little nauseous. He felt the pinprick of Lady Madeleine's claws through his pajama bottoms and opened his eyes again.

Dear Harry,

Many happy returns. I have created this pudding, which I hope you enjoy. I apologize for my handwriting, I have multiple gnome wounds.

Yours,

Percy

Harry put his head in his hands, careful not to crease the letter. Lady Madeleine curled up next to him and began purring. He needed to talk to Percy. He needed a candid rejection, otherwise Harry didn't think he would survive the summer.

But it was his birthday. He would accept the pudding in the spirit it was given. A completely platonic pudding between coworkers.

Sighing, Harry carefully opened the package.

It was a carrot cake.

Harry stared at the cake.

"How could he possibly know?" he whispered, closing his eyes again. He could not recall ever having mentioned liking carrot cake to Percy. His gran used to make it. It was his mum's favorite. He very rarely spoke about his gran, and only to his dad and Monty. His dad, who had known her, and Monty, who should have been allowed to.

Harry raggedly inhaled, his face feeling uncomfortably warm. Gnome wounds. Percy must have used what was available at the Burrow. Fighting gnomes for carrots. Ridiculous. Just to make him a cake for his birthday. A cake Percy must have chosen for the simple reason that he had thought Harry would like it.

He didn't know if he could bring himself to eat it, but he had to. He had to give Percy a detailed report.

Severus watched his son trudge into the kitchen carrying a broom that had seen better days, perhaps a century prior, wearing a red shirt emblazoned with an animated meat cleaver, with an owl on his head. Harry's faint smile was marred by a twinge of pain. Severus kept his face blank, not wanting to trouble his son with his own concerns.

Harry spotted the goblet of blood red potion immediately.

"That time of the month again," Harry said with a self-deprecating smile. He sat down and reached for the goblet. The owl flew to join Iseult on her perch.

"Your appointment with Andromeda Tonks is next week," Severus said. "But that is a concern for next week. Today is the anniversary of your birth. Congratulations."

Harry laughed, and the weight that had settled in Severus' chest lightened. He might not have been able to understand all of Harry's burdens, not completely, but he could make them easier to bear.

As Harry drank his potion, which Severus discreetly laced with something to ease whatever pain his son was in, Severus removed Harry's birthday quiche from the oven.

"That looks amazing, dad," Harry said as he daringly added cream and sugar to his coffee. The boy normally drank it black, but Severus was unsure if that was his son's preference or simply more of his mirroring of others.

"It is but a trifle," he said, setting the quiche before Harry.

"I thought it was a quiche," Harry said, grinning at him.

Severus graciously ignored him, turning instead to the window where several owls waited. Harry's cat slunk into the kitchen, the egg pouch slung across her back.

"Can she have some?" Harry asked, looking at the quiche.

"If she is intelligent enough to eat around the parts she cannot consume," Severus said, paying the *Daily Prophet* owls, who were also expressing too much interest in his son's breakfast. He accepted packages from several other birds and waved them off. "There is an envelope from your Slytherin acquaintances."

"Really?" Harry asked. "I told them they didn't have to give me anything."

"And yet they persist," Severus said, setting the thick envelope down. There was also a tube sent by the Lovegood girl. "Are you required at the Ministry today?"

Harry shook his head. "I only have to check in every other day to drop off the rubbish I've collected." Harry hesitated, then added, "I'm meeting Monty and Sirius at the Leaky Cauldron."

Severus calmly poured himself a cup of coffee. *Sirius*. Well. Severus too had a name his son called him, a name *only* his son would call him, and him alone.

Harry opened the large envelope first, and pulled out a bound stack of muggle paper. Harry read the first page and laughed.

“It seemed the others in my dormitory are sick of me playing, and I quote, *sea shanties*, and want me to learn *real music*. I think the hardest part was finding a muggle.” Harry snorted. “They went through Terence’s squib cousin.”

Severus looked at the papers with renewed interest. “What music?”

Harry shook his head. “Bach, Fauré. Bartók?” He flipped through the bound papers, frowning. “This is...too much.”

“We will have to arrange a performance for when you have mastered these pieces,” Severus said.

Harry gave him a flat look. “As long as no one complains about the clacking.”

Harry opened the tube next, pulling out a long roll of parchment. He opened it, revealing a prismatic watercolor portrait of his cat.

“Luna's getting really good,” Harry said with a tender expression. “Where can I put this up?”

“I might have a suggestion,” Severus said.

Harry looked at him questioningly, but didn't press for an answer.

After the quiche was consumed and the remainder preserved, Severus stood and motioned for his son to follow.

“Did you get a whole mandrake?” Harry asked as they descended into the basement.

“That will be broached come moonset,” Severus said, stopping at the bottom of the stairs. “I have something else to show you this morning.”

Harry stopped beside him, staring at the recently added door. “Dad?”

Severus smirked, then opened the door for his son.

Harry stepped into the doorway, gaping at the massive space. It was a cavernous room, partially under the house and partially under the garden, magically expanded, lined with smooth, dark stone inscribed with runes. There was a second entrance that led to the greenhouse, just in case.

“You are entitled to your own room in this house,” Severus said. “It is a blank canvas.”

“Is that a quarter pipe?” Harry asked, pointing at the ramp Severus had conjured.

“It is merely an example,” he said, reaching into his robes. “You may do what you wish here. Spellcrafting requires a sufficiently secure area, which the living room is assuredly not.”

Harry turned around, his eyes misty.

Severus cleared his throat and pulled out his old copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. “I myself have created several spells. At the time I had decidedly less caution and tact. As such, my efforts are memorialized in this Potions book. I am aware you intended to use your mother’s. While she was an adept potioneer, her passion was charms. Should your brother advance to N.E.W.T. Potions, perhaps he could—”

Harry hugged him so quickly that, for a moment, Severus thought he was being attacked. Then Harry released him and turned swiftly around.

“Thanks, dad.”

Severus hesitated, then placed a hand on his son’s shoulder. “You are welcome.”

Monty nervously pushed around what was left of his breakfast. Sirius always made sure to get him before what passed for breakfast at Privet Drive was served. The grapefruit slices were getting thinner and thinner as summer progressed.

Sirius leaned back in his chair, sipping his tea, a cigarette dangling from his fingers. He seemed to have picked up the habit recently, or perhaps he was breaking twelve years of enforced sobriety. Either way, he made sure to direct the smoke away from Monty. According to Sirius, Monty’s mum had been insistent on *no smoking around the baby*.

“I still can’t believe you found James’ old goggles,” Sirius said with a sad smile. “Your grandmother Euphemia hit the roof when she found out he’d lost them.”

Monty smiled to himself. It was funny how Harry had kept Sirius in the Room of Requirement and never told him what it was.

He looked under the table, where he was hiding Harry’s present. He hoped Harry liked it. At least it was useful, and had to be better than—

The fireplace in the Leaky Cauldron’s dining room lit up, and Harry casually walked out of it, not a speck of ash on his clothes. Monty had expected robes, which Harry said was the norm at the Ministry, but Harry was dressed as a muggle. Torn black trousers with the cuffs turned up, black dragonhide boots, a red shirt with a meat cleaver swinging around, an old blue courier bag, and an ancient broom over his shoulder. Harry looked around apathetically, but brightened when he spotted Monty. Even though he and Sirius had disguised themselves with charms, Harry still recognized him. Monty waved, then felt sort of lame for doing so. But Harry grinned and waved back as he walked over.

Sirius sat up, ashing directly onto the floor.

“Have you ever heard of noblesse oblige?” Harry said, glancing at the ashes.

“No,” Sirius said shortly.

Harry sighed, then turned to Monty. “Morning.”

“Happy birthday,” Monty said.

“Thanks,” Harry said. “Were you two eating breakfast? Did you want to finish?”

“I’m done,” Monty said, shoving his plate away. “I have something for you.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “You really don’t have to.”

“Well, I did,” Monty said, pulling Harry’s gift from under the table. “I don’t need it anymore, and I reckon it’s better than what they’ve given you.”

Harry stared at the Nimbus 2000. “You’re giving me your broom?”

“My *old* broom,” Monty said pointedly. “I’ve got the Firebolt. I haven’t ridden this in ages.”

“I thought you brought that for me,” Sirius said, his shoulders dropping.

“You can ride the Bluebottle,” Monty said. “It’s more your speed.”

Sirius looked aghast. “I’m only thirty-four!”

Harry hesitated, then set the broom he carried down. “Monty, I can’t—”

“I’ll chuck it into the fire if you don’t take it,” Monty said, drawing an appalled look from Harry. “I don’t even know how McGonagall paid for it. I bet she used school money.”

Harry snorted, then finally took the Nimbus. “Probably. Thank you. I was getting outstripped by passing birds yesterday. This’ll make my job go faster.”

Sirius smiled rakishly at Harry. “This one says you’re working for the Portkey Office?”

“I am,” Harry said. “I know everything about portkeys except how to make one. Ready to go?”

“Where are we going?” Monty asked, taking his Firebolt from under the table. Waving a Firebolt around would have made him stand out almost as much as his scar. No one else at Hogwarts had one, and it wasn’t exactly a secret that Monty Potter did.

“The Rule and Compass, a pub in Tinworth,” Harry said as they walked towards the fireplace. “Did you read the article on floo safety?”

Monty gave him a withering look. “I messed up *one* time.”

“Breathe *before* you enter the fire,” Harry said, pointing to a helpful poster displayed next to the fireplace. It depicted someone getting shot out of a chimney.

“You’ve had trouble flooing?” Sirius asked, looking between them.

“It was fine,” Monty said. “Nothing happened.”

“I’ve got dramamine if you need it,” Harry said guilelessly.

Monty rolled his eyes. “Yes, I read the article. I’ll be fine.”

“You’re a bit of a mother hen, aren’t you?” Sirius asked Harry.

Harry didn’t respond, instead throwing floo powder onto the flames and calling out for the pub.

Sirius laughed. “He can’t even deny it.”

“It’s his birthday,” Monty said, frowning at him.

Sirius grinned. “I know. Believe me, I don’t want to get on that kid’s bad side. He’s got a worse temper than your mum.”

“Really?” Monty said, picking up a handful of floo powder. He glanced at the sign, then put some back in the pot. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him angry before.”

“Lucky you,” Sirius said, throwing an arm over his shoulders. “So, using the floo. Take a breath, throw in the powder, state the destination loud and clear, keep your eyes closed and your elbows tucked in...”

Monty was terribly embarrassed by the time he successfully flooed to the Rule and Compass, only stumbling a little as he exited the fireplace. To his surprise, Harry caught him before he fell.

“You’re already taller than me,” Harry said with an odd smile. “Well, it was bound to happen. Your dad was—”

The fire lit up again and Harry took a step back, his expression smoothing over as Sirius stepped out of the flames carrying the Bluebottle.

“Was my dad tall?” Monty asked, looking at Sirius.

“Not as tall as me,” Sirius said, looking down at them from where his head resided in the clouds. “But yeah, he was.”

Monty glanced at Harry, who had gone to speak with the proprietress about something. He knew from pictures that his dad was tall in relation to his mum, but it was hard to translate that to seeing someone in person.

“Don’t worry,” Sirius said, ruffling Monty’s hair. “He didn’t start shooting up until sixth year.”

Harry walked back to them, carefully placing a dusty amber bottle into his bag and writing something on a long scroll of parchment. The parchment rolled up with a *snap*, and Harry tucked it into a pocket. He then pulled out a yellowed map and flicked it open.

“Since Sirius is around, you can practice some navigation spells,” Harry said. “Unless you brought your broom compass?”

Monty shook his head. He hadn’t thought of it.

“Next time,” Harry said. “Honestly, the Four-Point Spell is a pain. You should know enough astronomy to know which direction north is without resorting to it.”

It was a really simple spell. All Monty had to do was say *Point Me* and his wand spun around so the tip pointed true north. He practiced as Harry checked the charms on the brooms, Sirius watching from over his shoulder and tapping the new wand he had got from Ollivander. It was mahogany, like Monty’s dad’s had been, with a dragon heartstring.

A short time later, Monty was rising above the tiled roofs of Tinworth, a small seaside hamlet where witches and wizards live alongside muggles, unseen. Harry shared a smile with him, sitting sideways on the Nimbus and flying towards the sea. Monty had never been to the coast before, and they spent some time soaring over the sapphire waves, Sirius whopping in delight and taunting Monty into a race. They all knew the Bluebottle didn’t stand a chance, but Monty didn’t hold back, slipping on his dad’s old goggles and skimming the water. They even took the time to let Sirius have a go on the Firebolt, but Harry did have a job to do so eventually they set off across the land.

“It can’t be any bit of rubbish,” Harry said. They had landed next to a hedgerow on an isolated road. “It has to fit the departmental criteria.”

“What criteria?” Sirius asked, taking out another cigarette. “I thought they turned any old thing into a portkey.”

“It has to be of muggle origin, for one,” Harry said, poking around the hedge. “Muggle things are distinctive. No chance of mixing it up with some other enchanted object.” He stood up, holding an empty, sun-faded bag of steak-flavored crisps. “There are ways to look for traces of magic. I think some people have a sort of sixth-sense for it. Actually analyzing how an object has been enchanted takes ages, like what Professor Flitwick did with your Firebolt. So someone might be able to tell something’s been done to an item, but not exactly what.”

Harry shook off the bag and pulled out his scroll. “It ought to be something a muggle typically wouldn’t touch, nor an animal, in case they overcome any spells set up to ward them off. And something not easily destructible. Portkeys are dangerous.”

Sirius gave him a skeptical look.

“How’s that?” Monty asked.

Harry finished whatever note he was making and looked at him. “You’ve been apparated before, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“One of the risks of apparition is splinching, where you leave parts of yourself behind. A poorly made portkey, or someone interfering with a portkey in use, is similar. Except with splinching you can put people back together.”

Monty grimaced, while Sirius took a drag from his cigarette and kicked a pebble.

“Portkeys are inherently volatile,” Harry continued. “Theoretically, they exist in two points at once.”

As they traveled along the coast and across the quiet countryside, Monty listened to Harry opine on his theory of portkeys. It turned out most of Harry’s information came from an old pamphlet. As an intern, Harry did not have access to the actual spell. Sirius found this almost as amusing as Harry wearing a Wigtown Wanderers shirt, a team Monty had never heard of. Then again, he didn’t really follow any quidditch. He hadn’t even known about the Quidditch World Cup.

By late afternoon Harry called it a day. Despite having a bag stuffed with trash, and having spent a large portion of his birthday collecting it, Harry seemed to be in a good mood.

“Got a date tonight?” Sirius asked when they returned to the Rule and Compass.

“No,” Harry said, taking the Bluebottle back. “Not tonight.”

Sirius’ eyebrows shot up. “So you *do* have a date?”

“Thanks for coming along today,” Harry said to Monty, ignoring Sirius. “And for the broom. It’s definitely made my job easier. It was really thoughtful of you.”

“No problem,” Monty said. “Are you doing anything tonight?”

Harry glanced at the sky. “It’s a full moon. I think I’ll stay in. What about you, Mr. Black? Any moonlight rendezvous?”

A dark look crossed Sirius’ face, and Monty got the impression he was missing something big.

“Not this month,” Sirius said tightly.

Harry watched Sirius for a moment, then turned to Monty. “I’ll be going through Devon next week. The Weasleys live in Ottery St. Catchpole. Maybe you could stop by?”

Monty nodded, but he was apprehensive. He still hadn’t told Ron and Hermione about Sirius, and he definitely hadn’t said anything about Scabbers being Peter Pettigrew. Harry had confirmed that Ron hadn’t been told by his parents or brother. Monty would have hated a secret that big being kept from him, but he could guess what Ron’s reaction would be. And Hermione’s, given Crookshanks’ behavior was ultimately justified. He didn’t want to reopen that can of worms.

On a whim, he gave Harry a brief hug before the older boy vanished into the green flames, heading back to the Leaky Cauldron. Sirius apparated him back to Privet Drive but didn’t

linger. Whatever Harry had said had affected Sirius, leaving him deep in thought.

As he walked into his home, a concept Monty still struggled with, he wondered if Aunt Petunia had lied about his parents simply because it was easier than the truth.

Perhaps the first thing Severus should have noticed was the high-end racing broom his son had returned with, a broom he immediately recognized as Monty Potter's. Instead, what he noticed was that his son was badly sunburnt. Harry was nearly as red as his shirt.

"That bad?" Harry said, divesting himself of his broom and bag. He winced, and Severus summoned a jar of Burn-Healing Paste.

"Did you enjoy your time with your brother?" he asked, passing the jar to Harry.

"I did," Harry said, taking the jar. "I don't think I've ever got a sunburn before."

"One of the few benefits of living in a town shrouded in darkness," Severus said. "Go apply that, then we shall commence the festivities."

"Festivities?" Harry muttered, retreating to the bathroom.

When his son returned, Severus had the mandrake leaves prepared.

"I just put it in my mouth?" Harry asked, examining the wrinkled leaf.

"I would advise rolling it up," Severus said, doing just that with his own. "Or sticking it to the roof of your mouth."

"You haven't been able to find why this is necessary?" Harry asked, rolling up his leaf too.

"I imagine the restorative properties of the mandrake are relevant to restoring one to their human form," Severus said, sticking the tightly rolled leaf between his molars and cheek where it would hopefully stay. He would be greatly displeased if he had to undergo such an ordeal a second time.

"This is going to be so much fun," Harry said thickly.

"Your cat brought a cake," Severus said, smirking to himself as his son repositioned his leaf.

"She what?" Harry asked, following him into the kitchen. He paused in the doorway, and if he were not so sunburnt Severus imagined his son would be blushing.

"I doubt she baked it herself," Severus said. "Have you any idea who the sender may be?"

Harry's eyes darted from the carrot cake to him. "It's... from a friend."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

“Percy,” Harry said, making a pained face.

Severus watched his son squirm, a rare sight. Not that anyone else would have recognized it for what it was given how stoic Harry could be.

“It’s not like that,” Harry finally said. “He doesn’t even...he’s not like that.” Harry closed his eyes. “I should have had some before the leaf.”

Severus chuckled, drawing a wounded look from Harry. He gestured for Harry to sit down, then retrieved a knife for the cake. Teenage boys did not typically give one another cakes on their birthdays. That the former Head Boy had apparently made the carrot cake himself made Severus question Weasley’s intentions towards his son. If Harry was harmed, emotionally or otherwise, he would make the Weasley brat’s time in the Department of International Magical Cooperation...unpleasant.

“You will have the cake,” Severus said, “then I shall accompany you to the new skatepark in Northampton.”

Harry’s jaw dropped, nearly dislodging the mandrake leaf.

“No way,” he said.

Severus smiled to himself and presented the knife to his son.

“Happy birthday, Harry.”

Tenders of Affection

Chapter Summary

July 1994

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry stayed where he was for a moment, flat on his stomach on an examination table, before rolling on his side so he could swing his legs over. Andromeda had her back turned, taking notes on whatever she was taking notes on.

He gripped the edge of the table to stop his arms from shaking.

“I’ve spoken with Madam Pomfrey,” Andromeda said. “Your growth is commensurate with other boys your age.”

Harry looked at the floor, trying to get his breathing under control. “That’s good.”

“You’ll be of age next year,” she said, turning around. “We can explore additional treatment options then.”

Harry nodded. He could wait another year. It wasn’t that long, in the scheme of things.

“Also,” Andromeda said, in a tone that made Harry look up, “I wanted to say thank you.”

Puzzled, he asked, “Why?”

“You helped my cousin,” she said with a gentle smile. “He was much healthier than we had anticipated when he arrived here. While the headmaster insisted on anonymity for any students involved, Sirius did intimate that a certain Slytherin prefect helped him.”

“It was the right thing to do,” Harry said.

“But not an easy thing to do,” Andromeda replied. “Many prefer to walk the path of least resistance. It takes a certain strength to cut against the grain.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “That’s a muggle saying.”

“Blame my husband,” she said, picking up her parchment again and rolling it up. “I have another appointment, so I will take my leave. You can rest for as long as you want.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, watching her go. He shut his eyes, gritting his teeth against the ache in his kidneys. Soon it would stop, and he would be able to stand and walk out on his own.

Six months of reprieve, then another six months, and then he would be of age in the magical world.

After some time, Harry slid off the examination table, grabbed the Nimbus 2000 he inexplicably had been gifted by his brother, and left St. Mungo's.

As he flew over patchwork fields, delineated by hedgerows and dotted with trees, Harry wished his brother was with him. But Monty had schoolwork, and his friends, the necessary safety imparted by the Bond of Blood on his Aunt Petunia's home, Sirius Black. And technically Harry wasn't supposed to have anyone with him, though the likelihood of being caught was remote. Still, it was nice being out of Cokeworth and out of the office.

Harry had never really breathed fresh air until he had started at Hogwarts. It was something he associated with magic, but most of what he passed over was distinctly unmagical. Wheat ripening in fields, tractors, paved roads. Magical families naturally gravitated to where magic dwelt, establishing their homes there. In cases where they didn't, the magic rose up around them, their presence drawing magical creatures and plants. It was symbiotic, from what Harry had observed, and he was curious about exploring the phenomena. Did a magical child like Monty, stuck in a muggle neighborhood, begin to change his environment with his mere presence? Or would he need to have thrived to do so?

That day, Harry was passing through Ottery St. Catchpole, where the Weasleys lived. It was also where Luna and her father lived, and the Diggorys. The Lovegoods were getting their portkey flown to Antarctica, so Harry didn't have to account for them. He did see their house, which was shaped like a giant rook. The chess piece, not the bird, though he thought the latter would have been more their style. Maybe one with rainbow plumage. Harry didn't know if the Lovegood house had a name like the Burrow, but to him it was the Rookery.

It wasn't located that far from the Burrow, he knew, but Harry avoided flying past Percy's house. He did know where it was, he had a map, but he had no reason to visit, nor did he wish to be seen. Harry couldn't claim to know the other Weasleys very well, but he had seen enough of how Percy's siblings had treated him at Hogwarts, knew how often Ron was rude to Luna, and while he had forgiven Ginny—and didn't truly blame her, as he wouldn't have blamed any kid manipulated by cursed object—he knew her fawning over Monty made his brother uncomfortable. Not to mention Fred and George and their constant pranks. Their pranks, or jokes, or whatever they were, ranged from annoying to assault. Not that casual violence was recognized as a problem in the magical world. Their routine tearing down of Percy upset him more.

Harry didn't know what to think of Percy's parents. They seemed to have written him off as the least troublesome child of theirs, devoting their energy to dealing with the rest. Their indifference to his diabetes was jarring. Harry's own dad had a vested interest in his health. He had invented potions for him, far and above what Mr. and Mrs. Weasley did for Percy.

Perhaps bearing the financial strain had overly taxed them, he didn't know. If so, Harry thought it a poor excuse to neglect Percy's dietary needs.

Then there were the Diggorys.

Harry had no interest in seeing the Diggory home, nor any Diggory ever again.

As there were just the two families going to the Quidditch World Cup on the same day, Harry picked a point close to right in between their properties: Stoatshead Hill.

It was a steep hill, covered in brambles and pocked with rabbit holes, gnarled roots for someone to twist their ankle on. It was the kind of place someone might go for a ramble, and there was plenty of muggle detritus to select from. Harry had taken to collecting garbage to discard later, aside from his portkey selection duties. Cigarette butts, greasy bags, some disgusting or dangerous things he carefully levitated. Most of it wasn't suitable to be made into a portkey, and if he didn't want to touch it he doubted others would. But Harry was in luck. He found a mangy old boot that was just on the right side of gross to be turned into a portkey. Since Percy could apparate, Harry doubted he'd be taking a portkey. It was on par with the Knight Bus for the worst means of magical travel. And he had experienced Percy's apparition firsthand. Percy was masterful at it.

Harry stuffed the grimy boot into his bag, took another look at the horrible hike the Weasleys and Diggorys had ahead of them, then flew off to his next destination.

Percy frowned at himself in the mirror. Harry had told him to *dress casual*, and he had no idea what that meant. Robes were casual. Did Harry mean muggle casual? He had never been overly concerned about his appearance. Most of his siblings had inherited their father's straight hair, but he had his mother's unruly curls, as neatly parted and tame as he could make them. His robes didn't show signs of formerly being his brother Bill's, nor the typical Weasley shabbiness. He knew part of his father's troubles in advancing in his career came from his being both disheveled and chronically oblivious to it. Percy was to blame for some of that. Him and his disease.

Not that it should have mattered. Percy's father's devotion to his career, his passion, his work ethos, those were the important things. And yet their poverty, the Weasleys being blood traitors, mattered more. Despite winning the war, the Ministry and Wizengamot were still in part populated by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's former followers and sympathizers. Lucius Malfoy routinely donated obscene amounts of money to various institutions.

The door to the lavatory opened, and Percy quickly turned on a tap to make it seem like he had only been washing his hands. He was overthinking things. Harry was an orphan, he wore old and worn clothes. But Harry had liked when he wore a muggle suit, watching him try on different robes...

Percy splashed his face with cold water. He was *definitely* overthinking it. Since it was Harry, they were likely going to a muggle place. Which meant muggle clothes. He was prepared. Trousers and a button up shirt. Tucked or untucked? He'd seen muggles in professional garb with shirts tucked in. He quickly untucked his shirt, a simple purple and green flannel.

He checked his pocket watch. It was just dinner. He'd eaten dinner plenty of times. Hundreds of times in the Great Hall, barely able to see Harry for all the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws in the way.

Percy walked out of the lavatory and right into Henry Samuel Evans.

"Good afternoon," Harry said, lips quirking into one of his subtle smiles. Percy didn't miss the way Harry looked him over, how his smile grew. No one had ever looked at him the way Harry did.

"Evans," Percy said, even though he knew trying to establish professional distance only encouraged Harry. "Has something come up? Were we not meeting in the Atrium?"

"We were," Harry said. "But I finished earlier than expected. Did you still need some time?"

Percy thought about his briefcase, locked in his desk drawer, and decided he didn't need to bring work home that evening. "I do not."

"Right," Harry said, readjusting the bag over his shoulder. He wore a plain black T-shirt and black trousers that had fewer tears than Percy was used to seeing. The tears were relics from Harry skateboarding, he knew, from when he fell. Percy noticed the braided bracelet Harry usually wore, the one made out of thestral hair, was missing. He only had his old muggle watch, which Percy had never seen him without.

"I have been curious about your watch," Percy said thoughtlessly. He inwardly cursed himself when Harry's shoulders stiffened.

Harry was silent until they reached the lifts. He pushed the button to call one then crossed his arms, hiding the watch.

"It was my grandfather's," Harry said quietly, not looking at him. "He died a long time ago."

"My condolences," Percy said, feeling like an idiot. Harry's family, his lack thereof, was not something they discussed. As far as Percy knew, no one knew anything about Harry's family, or where he was from, or where he stayed during summer. Percy could understand someone trying to obscure their muggle origins to better assimilate, but since the basilisk incident Harry being muggleborn was no longer a secret. Why did Harry persist?

Harry's shoulders relaxed. "Thank you. You don't have a curfew, do you?"

"No," Percy said, hiding his surprise at the question. "You have yet to divulge your plans."

"It's nothing nefarious, I promise," Harry said, finally looking at him.

A lift arrived and they got on, joining the press of people fleeing the Ministry at the end of the work day. Percy was annoyed that their conversation was stymied by the presence of others. He should have suggested taking the stairs. He couldn't even appreciate how near Harry was, because it only made him want more.

Once freed from the packed lift, Harry led him through the Atrium. Instead of taking the floor, Harry walked to the visitor's entrance. Rather, approximately where the telephone box they had ridden down had landed.

Percy gave him a questioning look. Harry grinned at him, then took out his wand.

"The visitor's badge you get is used to call it down," Harry said, pointing his wand at the ceiling, "but there's an emergency switch for Magical Maintenance to use. *Pulsare*."

Percy looked at the ceiling, and saw one of the arcane golden symbols swimming across it had frozen in place. Bright lines appeared around it, connecting and growing into a square. Harry took his arm and pulled him several steps back. A telephone box descended, drawing attention from the crowd parting around them, but Percy was too focused on Harry's hand on his arm to care.

"How did you come by this information?" he managed to ask.

"I asked someone," Harry said, smirking. "I *do* work in Magical Transportation, and this counts as magical transportation."

Once the telephone box landed, Harry released him to open the door. Percy swallowed, then stepped inside. It was more tortuous than the lift. There was no need to input any code into the telephone itself, the box began rising again as soon as the door shut behind Harry. They were gawked at by passersby, but soon the telephone box entered the ceiling, and they were in darkness. Percy could hear his heart pounding in his ears, and the smell of lavender and mint that lingered around Harry was somehow stronger. It made him dizzy. Thankfully, the darkness was brief, and soon they emerged onto a deserted London street.

"Where are we going?" Percy asked, walking alongside Harry towards a street streaming with vehicular traffic.

Harry glanced at him, looking unusually shy. "I got Chinese takeaway," he said, patting his bag. "I thought we could eat in a park."

Harry faced away again, while Percy's mind stuttered on the fact that Harry had been blushing.

They reached the thoroughfare, and within a block Harry stopped next to a sign which declared the location a bus stop.

"It's not like the Knight Bus," Harry said, smiling at him as a red bus pulled up. It was only one level, not the three the Knight Bus boasted. Nevertheless, Percy was cautious as he followed Harry on. Harry dropped a coin into a slot and received two tickets from the driver, then led Percy to a cushioned bench. He stood aside to let Percy sit first, next to the window.

Percy had been in a car before, his father's Ford Anglia, so he was unsurprised by the rumbling and abrupt jerk when the bus began to move.

"It is very unlike the Knight Bus," Percy admitted, pleased that the seating was fixed and not throwing him and Harry around. The Knight Bus had beds. Percy stopped himself from thinking about beds.

"And cheaper," Harry said. "Only a quid for both of us. It's nearly a galleon for the Knight Bus. It'd be cheaper if more people used it but, well, it's not governed by our department. It's a private entity."

Percy looked at Harry appraisingly. That wasn't something he had known, though he ought to have inferred it based on the absence of a Knight Bus office.

"Did you read the article on the use of creatures as mascots?" Percy said, mindful that they were straying close to breaching the Statute of Secrecy.

"I did," Harry said, looking at him. It was only polite to look at who one was speaking to, but Harry was so close Percy would only have to lean forward and—

"Lucky for the Irish that theirs are native," Harry said. "Not so much for Bulgaria, though calling them *creatures*..." Harry wrinkled his nose. Percy was riveted by it. He wanted to trace Harry's nose, the delicate arch of its bridge, the small curve to its tip. It was a classical nose, and as Percy hung on every word Harry obliquely said about veela rights, he understood that perhaps it was not so much the nose but that it was attached to the rest of Harry.

"Personhood should not be based on one's present location," Percy said.

"Exactly," Harry said, looking at him intently. "You've got it exactly right, Perce."

Percy nearly swooned.

"You have a way with words," Harry continued. "Do you think I could get a copy of your report on the network? I'd love to read it."

He swallowed. "Yes, of course. I shall acquire a copy posthaste."

Harry smiled at him. A real, genuine smile that made his eyes crinkle and the apples of his cheeks color.

"Thanks," Harry said. "Are you still processing vendor applications?"

Percy cleared his throat. "Yes, actually. Some should be going through your department too. Well, for short distance travel..."

Harry looked at the quilt he had spread under a tree, then at the pretty lake, then the people rowing past, then the fluffy, rosy clouds, then at Percy, who looked around the park with a contemplative frown, his sleeves rolled up, exposing freckled forearms with fine red hairs.

Forearms, of all the things to fixate on.

Shaking his head, Harry sat down and began removing containers from his bag. He had brought both chopsticks and forks, though he didn't foresee Percy struggling with the former.

"I've never had Chinese food before," Percy said, joining him on the quilt.

"I've only had it a few times," Harry admitted, passing Percy a set of chopsticks. "You hold them sort of like a quill." He broke his apart to demonstrate, and watched as Percy worked it out. "I think it's more fun than eating with a fork, but I've got those too."

"Are you familiar with all of these dishes?" Percy asked, experimentally opening and closing the chopsticks.

"A bit," he said, picking up the nearest plastic container. "I can tell you the names, at least. I avoided anything with peanuts and oyster sauce, for obvious reasons. But, just in case, I've got my allergy medication in my bag, so you can *accio* it and stab me."

Percy nodded, then accepted the container from Harry. "What's this?"

"Chow mein," Harry said. "There's also salt and pepper chicken, spring rolls, chicken balls, chips, curry sauce, chilli sauce, sweet and sour sauce, fried rice."

He unearthed a plastic bag, holding it away from himself. "They gave me prawn crackers too. All yours."

Percy accepted the bag, holding it awkwardly. "This is a considerable amount."

Harry looked around at the modest spread. "It was only a tenner." He checked his watch, then glanced at Percy just as he stabbed a chopstick through a chicken ball. Harry slapped a hand over his mouth to smother his laughter, then reached for his bag again to find the drinks.

"Is this why you asked me if I had a curfew?" Percy asked as Harry led him into an open air theater. Stands of seats fanned out, already filling with people, and Harry confidently strode up them, to a row just a few away from the stage.

"Surprise," Harry said, grinning at him. "I'm taking you to see Hamlet."

"That's one of Shakespeare's?" Percy asked, recalling the English literature portion of Muggle Studies.

“It is,” Harry said. “You’ve been to a play before?”

“I have,” Percy said. “With Penelope.”

“Oh,” Harry said flatly, sitting down. “Forgot about her.”

Though it had been just over a month since Percy had broken up with her, he also had forgotten about her. “I...well, *I* broke up with *her*.”

Harry’s head swung around. “Really?”

“Yes,” Percy said, his face heating. “She was not my type.”

“Oh?” Harry said, this time with more interest. “She seemed like it.”

“I know,” Percy said. “Our relationship was very transactional.”

Harry winced, then looked away. “How mercenary of you.”

“I know,” Percy repeated. “Which is why I ended it. I do not wish to compromise myself in such a manner again.”

Harry sighed, then looked up at the darkening sky. “I’m sure you’ll find a nice girl. You’re... you’re really great, you know.”

Percy closed his eyes. He had been sorted into Gryffindor for a reason. Harry was honest about who he was, as much as he could be while keeping so much of his life private. Percy could do him the courtesy of being honest as well.

“Perhaps not a girl,” he whispered.

Harry gave him a startled look, but someone had stepped onto the stage and the audience’s chatter had fallen into a hush. Percy could feel Harry watching him, gaze boring into him, shifting whatever parameters Harry had set for their relationship. Percy sat still, not daring to look back lest whatever new paradigm his quiet words had created shattered around them.

“Who’s there?” a man dressed as a guard demanded.

“Nay, answer me!” cried another.

Percy focused on the stage as the story unfolded, his skin buzzing with his keen awareness of Harry at his side. Harry, leaning forward in his seat. Pressing against Percy as the main character, Hamlet, said to his mother, “I shall in all my best obey you, madam,” as a man named Polonius told his servant to spy on his son, told his daughter to spurn Hamlet’s entreaties. As Polonius conveyed this to his king and queen.

“And my young mistress thus I did bespeak, ‘Lord Hamlet is a prince, out of thy star. This must not be.’”

Percy looked at Harry then, saw the lights reflected in his dark eyes like burning stars, the displeased frown, his furrowed brow. *A prince, out of thy star.*

“But I am pigeon-livered,” Hamlet moaned, “and lack gall!”

“It’s a stupid idea,” Harry whispered, “acting mad based on the words of a ghost.”

“Why wouldn’t he believe his father’s ghost?” Percy asked.

“You’ll see,” Harry promised.

Harry suddenly grabbed his hand, and Percy froze.

“I love this part,” Harry whispered. “I remember watching it on television with my gran.”

“Do you think I am easier to be played upon than a pipe?” Hamlet shouted at Guildenstern, his eyes wild, shoving the pipe in his childhood friend’s face. “Call me what instrument you will. Though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me!”

Harry nodded along, letting go of Percy’s hand and crossing his arms.

Warmth spread through him when Harry laughed at Hamlet’s antics.

“Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a camel?” Hamlet asked Polonius, looking at the cloudless night sky.

“By the mass, and tis like a camel, indeed,” Polonius replied.

“Methinks it is like a weasel,” Hamlet said, grinning madly.

“It is backed like a weasel,” Polonius said indulgently.

He shared an amused look with Harry, who bit his lip in a way that made Percy desperate to learn what it would be like.

“Or like a whale?” Hamlet asked.

“*Very* like a whale,” Polonius effused.

Percy held his breath when Hamlet went to his queen mother, a woman who seemed blissfully, purposefully ignorant of the machinations of her court, or perhaps intimately entwined with the murder of her own husband. He could not tell.

“Come, come, and sit you down,” Hamlet growled at his mother, seizing her and forcing her into a chair. “You shall not budge! You go not till I set you up a glass where you may see the inmost part of you!”

His mother struggled, shrieking, “What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me? Help! Help! Ho!”

Percy watched, stunned, as Hamlet cried out and stabbed into the tapestry behind which Polonius hid, killing the meddling old man.

“Oh, I am slain!” Polonius cried.

Harry snorted, then covered his mouth. “See? Muggles don’t think ghosts are real. His mother can’t see it.”

Percy nodded absently, still shocked by the abruptness of Polonius' death.

“Good night, mother,” Hamlet said cheerily, dragging the man’s corpse off.

“I think that’s intermission,” Harry said as the audience broke into applause. “What do you think so far?”

Percy thought over what he had seen. The obsequious courtiers, the corrupt court, the obedient Ophelia, the overbearing Polonius. How it had taken Hamlet murdering a man for his mother to even listen to him.

“I think it’s brilliant,” Percy said emphatically, smiling at Harry’s flushed and eager expression. “Though I do hope it has a happy ending.”

Chapter End Notes

Which Hamlet? Kenneth Branagh (Gilderoy Lockhart) or David Tennant (Barty Crouch)? You get a bonus Timothy Spall (Peter Pettigrew) in one of them!

Crab rangoon is an abomination.

Heads up, I got some mad studying to do, so it'll be a minute until the next chapter!

Shell Shock

Chapter Summary

yo

The mood in the kitchen was tense. Harry glanced at his dad, who was hiding behind a *Daily Prophet*, then to his cat.

Lady Madeleine sniffed the whole raw chicken in front of her then looked at Harry.

“Happy belated birthday,” he said apologetically.

“Meow.”

Harry sighed. “It’s got a surprise in the middle.”

“This is absurd,” his dad said, snapping the paper shut in exasperation. “Harry mistook the day he received you for the more important date.”

Lady Madeleine turned her glare onto him.

“Your Highness,” his dad spat.

Lady Madeleine inclined her head.

“It has all your favorite things,” Harry said, reaching to scratch her ears. “The best chicken organs money can buy. I’ve also got something else for you.”

Harry pulled an empty cardboard box from under the table. Lady Madeleine’s eyes widened. She started purring, and Harry knew he had won.

Harry left his cat to enjoy her very belated birthday feast, and his dad to make sure she didn’t choke on a chicken bone, and went down to his room in the basement. He still couldn’t quite believe such a large space was his. It made the extension charms he knew look like a joke, though Harry was somewhat mollified by the inescapable fact that his dad had years more experience with magic.

He closed the door, sighing in relief. While he did feel bad for forgetting Lady Madeleine’s actual birthday, and would have showered her in raw chicken and old boxes regardless, his offering served a greater purpose.

Harry could not afford to be interrupted, not on the eve of his brother’s birthday.

The room had seen few changes in the week since his own birthday. Luna's portrait of Lady Madeleine had gone up right away, only to be relocated to his house for fear of its destruction should a spell go awry.

Between work and thinking about Percy, Harry didn't have the time to decorate. The cavernous room—a lair, his dad had made a lair for him—was still lined in smooth, dark stones, dense with protective charms. The most Harry had done was analyze whether his dad's frankly overbearing spellwork would interfere with his own.

The most noticeable addition was the pocket chalkboard Monty had got him, which was spread out and hung along a wall. The chalkboard was covered in wandering equations and arcane diagrams. Harry glanced at it, no longer unnerved by his fevered rantings. He had needed some way to direct his restlessness after his outing with Percy. An outing which, as the days passed, seemed more and more like a date.

“Perhaps not a girl.”

“Alas, poor Benjy,” Harry said aloud, not wanting to become distracted. He hadn't been able to forget the way Percy looked at him. After the play, moments before he apparated home. The hesitation. A missed opportunity.

“I knew him, Horatio,” Harry continued, walking to the other recent addition. Benjy lay on the center of the floor, surrounded by runes and thestral tail hair. Harry had been sad to scavenge it from the bracelet Luna had made, but needs must. “A thestral of infinite jest!”

Kneeling, Harry pressed one hand against the nearest rune. Eiwaz, the yew tree. The movement from day to night. From life to death.

The room, Harry's room, had no lighting other than what he created. As he began his incantation, the light faded, the room slipped into shadow. The dull red glow of the rune beneath his hand pulsed rhythmically. In a language not spoken for centuries, Harry had written the story of what Benjy was. He began the incantation.

Harry glanced at toy thestral's lifeless form, never breaking his stream of words. Frankie swam overhead, translating his every utterance, words he had recited over and over again to assure himself of their meaning.

“On þām þīestrestum hyrnum...”

Sweat pearled along Harry's brow, dripping down to sting his eyes. He blinked it away. He would not be distracted. He gripped his wand and thought of shadows and silence. His voice grew deeper, darker, resonating across the frigid stones. His breath came out in a mist.

“On þǣre stōwe þǣr nāna þīestra ne sind... Donne mīn sceaceþ lif of līce...”

Harry dropped his wand, pressing both hands to the runes encircling Benjy. The little thestral was silent and still.

Bent forward, Harry's fingers curled in reflex, his blunt nails scraping against the stone. He closed his eyes, ignoring the frantic pounding of his chest. He had got it wrong. Months of research should have been *years*. He wasn't ready for this. He should have used Iseult.

He couldn't stop. It was far too late for that. He had to finish the incantation.

"Ic wille áwreccan hyne of slápe!"

A terrible shriek resounded through the room. There was a blinding flash, dazing Harry despite his shut eyes. The runes had flared, so strongly he could feel the magic writhing under his palms, the raging heat of it burning him. Harry bit his lip, hoping whatever spells his dad had cast in the room would kick in if he was in serious danger, hoping his dad hadn't underestimated how foolish he could be.

The shriek cut off, leaving the room in profound silence. The sound of his own breathing was obscene.

Harry sat back, carefully peeling his hands from the floor. After a moment, he opened his eyes.

He was afraid to look at his hands, but he did it anyway.

They were fine. Perfectly fine. Not a scratch, not even any residue from the chalk and blood he had used to draw the runes. It had all gone into his spell. Harry glanced at Benjy. The little thestral was still laying where he had placed it. All the thestral hair was gone, which was shit, but he could get more.

Sighing, Harry rocked onto his feet. He was disappointed his first foray into spell creation hadn't panned out. It was his own fault, really, for picking such an ambitious goal. He should have begun with something simpler, less ambitious. A spell to tell if another boy liked you, perhaps.

Shaking his head, Harry retrieved his wand from the floor. He still had a present to deliver, and Iseult wouldn't thank him for disrupting her hunting time. Now that the runic circle, and everything he had put into it, was gone, Harry was able to approach his little thestral. He bent down for the toy and froze.

Benjy II was struggling onto his tiny horned hooves. His wings were splayed out to help him balance, and after the moment the little thestral was upright and shrieking in triumph.

Harry dropped to the floor with a *thump*, mystified.

"You *are* a thestral of infinite jest," Harry said quietly, reaching a shaking hand out to Benjy II. The thestral nosed at the tips of his fingers, nibbling in response to the lingering scent of blood in an uncanny imitation of life.

Harry tried to scoop Benjy II up, but Benjy II pranced away and launched into the air. Harry marveled at this idiosyncrasy, wondering how much Benjy II recalled of his previous incarnation.

“You haven’t borne me on your back a thousand times,” Harry said, watching the tiny thestral soar across the room, “but I do have something for you to carry, if you are equal to the task.”

Benjy II shrieked in acknowledgement, and Harry smiled.

Visiting Sirius’ townhouse in London, Grimmauld Place, had not prepared Monty for what he would find at Neville’s house. Neville’s *manor*.

They approached the estate from above, flying on Sirius’ motorbike. Monty leaned precariously from the sidecar, trying to take in the grounds. The sea of the front lawn, mown in curving shapes that tricked the eye. The neatly trimmed hedge, lining an empty drive Monty could not discern the purpose of. For whose car? Was it just to keep up appearances? Sirius must have noticed his interest, as he did not land immediately. Instead, he did a circuit above the manor itself. Regimented gardens in the back, an intimidating building of grey stone, spires, and crenellations. From such a height, Monty was gobsmacked at the vastness of it all. As they flew around, he squinted against the glint of the greenhouses, the lake—Neville had a *lake*—the faint voices of people below...

“We should land,” Monty shouted over the roar of the engine. A wholly unnecessary roar, as the motorbike had been thoroughly charmed to function.

“What?” Sirius shouted back, grinning maniacally.

They went for another lap, Sirius finally landing when spells started being cast from below. Sirius aimed for the gravel drive, and they skidded to a halt.

“Augusta Longbottom always was a killjoy,” Sirius muttered, turning off the engine. Monty wasn’t entirely sure there *was* an engine, or what the keys did. “Alright, kid?”

“Yeah,” Monty said, clambering out of the sidecar. “I feel like I’m in *Mansfield Park*.”

“What’s that?” Sirius asked, ruffling Monty’s hair. Monty ducked away, but secretly he was pleased. He’d always been jealous of other kids getting carried around by their parents. The Dursleys never had a kind word for him, much less a kind touch. He couldn’t remember someone ever having ruffled his hair before. Except for Harry.

Monty frowned, drawing a look of concern from Sirius.

“Are you worried he won’t like your gift?” Sirius asked, glancing at the house. The front doors had been flung open, and an elderly woman with a dreadfully familiar hat was marching towards them. A frantic house-elf trotted at her side, her pale-green toga hiked above her knobbly knees.

“No, it’s not that,” Monty said, retrieving the wrapped present and card from the sidecar. “I was just thinking—”

“Sirius Orion Black,” the elderly woman said, her cane stabbing into the ground as she advanced.

“Mrs. Longbottom,” Sirius said, sweeping a gallant bow.

Neville’s gran, Mrs. Longbottom, drew herself up, her dark green robes settling around her. Closer, she was much shorter than she initially appeared, which was at odds with Monty’s impression of her. Then again, most of what he knew about Neville’s gran came in the form of Howlers.

Mrs. Longbottom gave the motorbike a sidelong look, then stared down her narrow nose at Sirius. Monty checked the ground, wondering if they were stood on a hill.

“And you must be Fleamont Potter.”

Monty’s head jerked up, and he smiled automatically. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Longbottom.”

“It’s good to finally meet a friend of Neville’s,” Mrs. Longbottom intoned. “My grandson has told me all about you.”

“Has he?” Monty asked, his trepidation growing. How many people were attending? Had Neville told his entire family about him? What exactly had Neville said?

Mrs. Longbottom nodded solemnly. “Oh yes,” she said, reaching out to shake his hand. Monty tried to take it gently, but her grip reminded him of Hedwig’s claws around a mouse. He wanted to look to Sirius for help, but Mrs. Longbottom had a penetrating gaze and he was convinced looking away would be a sign of weakness to her. The taxidermied vulture swayed forward, beak first.

“Well, come on in,” she said, finally releasing Monty. “I’ve left Neville with the guests. Unfortunately, he hasn’t got his mother’s talent for hosting.”

Monty opened up his mouth to object, but Mrs. Longbottom spun away, startling a squeak from the house-elf.

“Masters Black and Potter is to follow Hopsy,” the house-elf said, curtsying so low her nose brushed the grass.

“Lead the way,” Sirius said, slinging an arm across Monty’s shoulders. Hopsy snapped upright and hurried after her mistress. Sirius followed, dragging Monty with him. They paused at the threshold, and Sirius bent down to meet Monty’s eyes.

“We’re going to get a lot of attention in there,” Sirius said in a low voice. He was still thin, even after months of recovery, and Monty could make out worry lines. “A lot of old people fawning over you.”

“I know,” Monty said, inordinately glad he’d asked Sirius to help him buy robes. Being Monty Potter was enough to make him stand out. He didn’t need to look like a muggle around a bunch of rich purebloods.

Hopsy had raced ahead to open the doors for Mrs. Longbottom, and remained in a bow as Monty and Sirius passed.

“You didn’t have to come,” Monty pointed out, more concerned about Sirius than himself. In his three years at Hogwarts, Monty had grown accustomed to being stared at. Sirius, he knew, despite his outward calm, was filled with turmoil. Monty didn’t want to ask what Azkaban had been like, but he knew pain and grief often faded with time. Sirius had never been given that time. The dementors would not allow it.

“I wanted to,” Sirius said, pushing Monty in ahead of him, into the foyer. Monty’s first instinct was to gape, but he was keenly aware of how much of an outsider, how much of a *tourist*, he felt. He’d seen the looks Hermione’s parents got in Diagon Alley.

The chandelier was bigger than his uncle’s company car. They must have mined an entire continent for the number of diamonds it had. The floor, walls, and twin staircases were all in a pale rose marble, flecked with gold.

Sirius caught Monty’s expression and rolled his eyes. “It’s magic, kid. Believe me, you’ve seen one of these houses, you’ve seen them all.”

Monty nodded and tightened his grip on Neville’s present, feeling less confident about his choice.

“This way, sirs,” Hopsy squeaked, waving them deeper into the manor.

“Just remember, you’re here for your friend,” Sirius said, shaking him gently. “We can handle the vultures.”

Several hours into the party and it was still going strong. The only person his age Monty had seen was Neville, who had greeted him at the entrance to the ballroom. Neville had graciously accepted the gift, adding it to a small pile of extravagantly wrapped presents. Not only was Monty glad for the robes, but glad he had purchased less mundane wrapping paper. He had become more comfortable in the manor when he realized he’d lived in the same grandeur while at school. Sirius was right; for witches and wizards a ballroom was not particularly luxurious, nor a sign of wealth.

“I thought everyone else would be related to you,” Monty admitted. He and Neville had taken refuge behind a growling monstera, watching the party through its fleshy leaves.

Neville passed him another bottle of butterbeer. They were living off the stuff.

“About half are Longbottoms,” Neville admitted, looking abashed by how geriatric his family was. “The rest are one to two hundred of my gran’s closest friends.”

Monty shared a grin with Neville. Just then, Mrs. Longbottom's voice rang through the ballroom. It was time to open presents.

"I hope dinner's after this," Neville said, sighing as the crowd parted for his grandmother.

Monty hadn't wanted to take any attention from Neville, especially not on his birthday, but he was starting to suspect Neville was more sly than he let on. Monty, and Sirius, took pressure off Neville as their presence distracted many of the guests.

It was obvious to Monty that his friend was not enjoying himself. Not the number of people in his home, not how overbearing his grandmother was, not how little his own desires had been taken into consideration. He told Monty, whispering as if confessing to some heinous crime, that he had only wanted to invite a few friends from school. The idea had been swiftly shot down, deader than the vulture on his gran's hat.

"Did your gran say you can come tomorrow?" Monty asked, ignoring the whispers that followed them as they were swept along in Mrs. Longbottom's wake.

Neville nodded, giving Monty a small smile. "I can't wait."

The present opening ceremony was disappointing, at least in Monty's opinion. Neville's smile grew increasingly strained with each gift. A new Remembrall, which immediately filled with red smoke. A large mirror clouded with shadows, which the elderly crowd was awed by. A beautiful set of crystal wizard's chess pieces. An embossed copy of the *Auror's Handbook*. A Comet 280, which Neville awkwardly held as pictures were taken. Monty bit his inner lip to not react; he had overheard that Alice Longbottom had been a chaser for Gryffindor. Having been shuffled to the front to be shown off next to Neville, Monty had a front row seat to his friend's discomfort.

When Neville got to the present from Monty, Sirius materialized at his side.

"Where have you been?" Monty hissed. If he tackled Neville to stop him from opening the present, what were the odds it would be in the *Daily Prophet*?

Sirius shrugged, totally unconcerned. "Brown-nosing. Half the Wizengamot's in here."

"What?" Monty asked, smiling at Neville. Neville looked genuinely excited to see what Monty had got him.

"I'll explain later," Sirius said. "Merlin, I need a smoke."

"Whoa!" Neville exclaimed, holding up one of the books. "It's the latest edition! Monty, where did you even find this?"

Monty shrugged.

"What is it, Neville?" Mrs. Longbottom demanded, seizing one of the books before Neville could object. "*Healing at Home with Herbs*?" She gave Monty a sharp look.

“It hasn’t been published yet,” Neville said, his voice abruptly more subdued, more apologetic.

“Neville’s helped me loads with Herbology,” Monty said loudly. Neville’s eyes widened, and Monty forged on. “He’s a genius at it.”

“He’s got his great-grandfather’s talent!” someone in the crowd rasped, causing Neville to turn the same shade as the marble.

Neville shut his eyes, visibly steeling himself before saying, “We could look at the greenhouses later? I’ve been helping...”

Monty nodded eagerly, and the moment passed. Another present was handed to Neville. Soon, all the presents had been divested of their wrappings, tables and house-elves began to appear, and dinner was on.

Twelve hours. Monty hardly believed his own watch, but the clock ticking away in the Dursley’s—in his—house didn’t lie. He’d been at Neville’s house for twelve hours. Sirius hadn’t bothered flying them back to Surrey, too exhausted himself from the endless circulation and socializing. He’d apparated them and the motorbike across the entire country, and left the motorbike in the Dursley’s driveway before apparating to Grimmauld Place.

Monty yawned as he tiptoed up the stairs to his room, wary of disturbing the Dursleys. He slunk past Dudley’s room, rolling his eyes at the flashing lights he could see through the cracks, and the sound of Dudley cursing as he hammered buttons. Somehow, it never disturbed Uncle Vernon.

He yawned again as he carefully opened his bedroom door. Hedwig hooted softly, then shuffled around on her perch and went back to sleep. Monty shut the door, just as carefully, and looked around his room.

The Dursleys hadn’t wanted to let Sirius into the house, but they had little choice in the matter. Monty had never been as open about the Dursleys as in first year, but Sirius had gleaned enough from their first few conversations to decide to investigate. Monty hadn’t told him about the cupboard, not yet, but Sirius had demanded to see his room. His room, filled with Dudley’s rubbish, broken toys, broken furniture. Where he had been trapped, and had no privacy. Where everything precious to Monty had been locked in a cage, or in a cupboard, or hidden under the floorboard Dudley had dislodged during one of his tantrums.

Magic fixed things. Not everything, but enough. It vanished rubbish, and repaired furniture. Monty appreciated it, more than Sirius likely understood, but it wasn’t the same. It wasn’t the same as the Dursleys giving him decent things, giving him enough food, giving him anything at all other than their chores and their vitriol. Monty knew the Dursleys would never be what he wanted them to be, what he used to dream about during the endless hours in the cupboard.

They would never be his family.

Monty sat heavily on his recently restored bed. No more broken frame, no more springs stabbing him through the mattress. He checked his watch. 11:59 PM. He was almost fourteen-years-old.

Monty sighed. He wished he'd gone to Grimmauld Place with Sirius. He could have asked. He *should* have asked. But they had agreed he would stay there starting tomorrow, his birthday.

Monty checked his watch again. Later that day, rather.

Something scratched at Monty's window and gave a hellish shriek. Monty jumped out of bed, his heart racing, scared half to death Uncle Vernon would storm his room, mass murdering godfather or no. There was another scratch, another shriek, and Hedwig hooted in dismay. It took him too long to understand what was happening. It was his *birthday*.

Monty hurried over to the window and eased it open, letting in a tiny thestral with a large package.

"He's alive!" Monty whispered, grinning as Benjy landed on his bed. The thestral shook off the strap that had been slung over him, then pawed at the package.

"Alright," Monty said, not bothering to shut the window before sitting back on his bed. The parchment wrapping unraveled itself at his touch, leaving Monty with a cryptic birthday message and...he wasn't entirely sure what it was. A bumbag? Baffled, Monty decided to read the letter first.

Dear Monty,

Congratulations, you are 14.

Monty snorted. Would it kill Harry to say *happy birthday*?

Every wizard needs a dread companion. Make sure you master this spell, you'll need it.

Probably.

H

PS DO NOT put your hand in the bag. Tip it out.

PPS Use Benjy II to confirm receipt. He's just been reborn, and this is his first mission.

PPPS Say hi for me

Monty frowned at the spell Harry had written, then set the parchment aside, his confusion growing. Tip it out? He looked over to see Benjy II pawing at a flap. The thestral skittered back when it fell open, and Monty felt a blast of heat that quickly abated. Deciding he didn't want whatever it was on his bed, Monty carefully lifted the bag and relocated it to his floor. He grabbed the bottom of it and tipped whatever was inside of it out.

A large, silver ball rolled onto his floor.

Monty stared at it. "What?"

There was a silvery ring, like a small bell, and a crack appeared on the...

Egg. It was an egg. Monty shuffled back. He knew—he *hoped*—Harry would not send him anything dangerous. He swallowed nervously as another crack formed, then another, ignoring the upset noises Hedwig made at being kept awake, and the intermittent shrieks from Benjy II, who was going off like a very small car alarm.

A piece of the silver shell fell to the floor with a clang. Monty had only a moment to wonder if it was real silver; whatever was inside the egg had begun to hatch. A beak, bright as polished gold, poked through the shell, shearing off more silver. Monty expected to see feathers next, assuming it was bird, but as more of the creature emerged, he saw the golden beak was accompanied by amethyst and emerald scales, finer than any gemstone Monty had seen.

With a sound like ripping foil, the head was out. It was a snake? A bird? The name was on the tip of his tongue. Silver egg, snake-bird...but a pair of dazzling amber eyes met his own and his thoughts were blown away.

"Uh," Monty said, wondering what the hell Harry had got him into. "Hi?"

Cakes

Chapter Summary

July 31st, 1994

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Severus sat at the kitchen table, taking indulgent sips of his coffee. It was thick, bitter, and dark, almost chocolate in its profile. He preferred it to the lighter roasts, their complex florals, their brightness. His son was of a similar inclination; light roasts made Harry's stomach hurt.

He took another sip, closing his eyes to enjoy the hush of predawn Cokeworth. The town was almost tolerable in moments like this.

Harry had raced out of Spinner's End the night before, no doubt eager to send his brother a birthday present. Severus could guess at what he had been doing in the basement. The boy was obsessed with resurrecting his toy thestral. A fascinating contraption, and a fitting project for a child like Harry.

Severus set his cup down. Harry was sixteen years old, a vast difference from the eleven-year-old he had met years ago. Five years, only two of those knowing who Harry was to him. The years before Hogwarts, his son hidden down the road...those were years they would never get back, years he could not make up for.

Had Lily's mother known? Had Rose willingly deprived them both?

He shut down that line of thinking. No matter how he yearned for it, he could not go back. He could only move forward. He could only persist.

Severus lifted his cup again, just as the front door opened. Harry's footsteps were light, even without the aid of magic. A habit picked up during his shoplifting days? *Had* the boy stopped stealing?

It was another fruitless line of inquiry. Severus decided he wouldn't care unless his son was caught.

"Good morning," Harry said, walking into a kitchen with a half-grown half-kneazle slung over one shoulder.

Severus narrowed his eyes, watching as Harry poured himself coffee, then dump in a startling amount of sugar into it. Something was different.

Harry let his coffee sit, turning instead to remove eggs from the refrigerator, humming softly to a song only he could hear. The cat purred, clawing her way up to drape around Harry's neck. Harry didn't seem to notice, too busy giving the egg he held a pensive look.

Egg.

"Where is the occamy egg?" Severus asked in a flat voice.

Something slammed into the window, far too early for it to be the owl post. Severus looked over and saw, to his dismay, that it was the toy thestral.

"Benjy II!" Harry said, dropping the egg he held. It floated back into the carton as Harry flung the window open, admitting the peculiar creature.

"Harry," Severus said, displeased with being ignored. "Where is the egg you were given?"

Harry left off cooing over his toy to look at him. It was then Severus realized the creature had a note tied to it, and that it had clearly been performing some delivery. A maiden voyage.

Severus did not care for the conclusion he came to. What fresh hell had his son unleashed?

"Henry Samuel Evans," he said. Harry froze, his fingers stilling on the twine wrapped around the thestral—he refused to call the thing *Benjy II*.

"I sent it to Monty," Harry said, without a shred of shame.

"Sit down," Severus said, crossing his arms.

Harry sat, setting the thestral on the table, where it began nibbling at the string wrapped around itself.

"I wish to be *very* clear," Severus said, coming to another realization. No matter how mature Harry typically acted, he was still a teenager. "You sent your younger brother, who lives in a muggle neighborhood, in a house filled with muggles, with only a squib to watch over him, an XXXX-classified creature. A highly territorial, extremely aggressive, choranaptyxic, *flying* creature."

"I—"

"And the means by which you transported this feral, size-changing creature was via your experimental miniature thestral."

Harry glanced at the thestral, which had been successful in freeing itself from the letter.

"Read it," Severus said.

Harry nodded, reaching for the letter. His eyes scanned the parchment, then stilled.

"What does it say?" Severus demanded.

Harry bit his lip, then held the note up for Severus to read. There was a single word on it.

HELP

Hedwig was long gone. He had needed her cage. He needed an adult.

As fascinating as the creature was, Monty felt well within his rights to have a proper freak out when, once fully out of its shell, the creature began to grow, reaching almost two feet before he got it into Hedwig's cage. That had been fun. It was still covered with whatever fluids were inside an egg, had a very sharp beak for a newborn, and had two legs. Two clawed bird feet. His initial assessment of *bird* had been partially correct. The creature sported a pair of wings as well.

Once over his initial shock, Monty began paying attention to what the creature was saying. It was mostly gibberish, and it took far too long for him to understand it wasn't speaking English. It was speaking *parseltongue*.

He had read the spell Harry sent again, hoping it held some answers. But no, Harry's description said it was a concealment charm.

At a loss, Monty had gone to sleep, hoping against all odds that the situation would be more comprehensible in the morning.

It was not. He still had a flying serpent in his owl's cage, one which he could not communicate with as it had very recently been born. The creature was obviously not something that belonged in the muggle world. Its closest mundane relative had gone extinct in the Cretaceous period. It could have been from a cartoon, it was so outlandish, so fantastic.

Monty groaned, rolling out of bed to grab a book from his desk. It should have been his first thought. In Newt Scamander he trusted.

Flipping through the text, Monty found the section on serpents, then winged serpents. The book opened to a picture of a creature identical to his. It was carrying off a rhinoceros.

"Occamy," Monty said, sighing in relief. He looked at the baby occamy in Hedwig's cage, who had the grace to go to sleep when Monty did. "You are an occamy."

The occamy hissed incoherently, and Monty smiled despite himself.

Monty knew that it was, in general, frowned upon to give someone a pet without warning. Calling an occamy a *pet* was a stretch, but it was either that or *dread companion*. Hedwig had nearly pushed the Dursleys to their limit, and she could pass for a regular owl. Uncle Vernon

had gone so far as to padlock her cage, and Monty had feared that, without his magical lockpick, Hedwig would have died from being unable to move and unable to hunt. It was sick and cruel. It hadn't occurred to the well-meaning Hagrid, or eleven-year-old Monty, overwhelmed with the existence of magic, with being a *wizard*, that perhaps a surprise owl would not go over well with his guardians.

Had Monty thought of it at the time, he would have told Hagrid what happened when Aunt Marge tried to gift Dudley a bulldog puppy, one of Ripper's evil offspring, when he was six. Aunt Petunia had put her foot down. It was a tantrum for the ages.

If Uncle Vernon saw the occamy, so improbable, so blatantly magical, he'd have a stroke.

He needed to get out of Privet Drive. Had Sirius got his note?

There was nothing to do but wait. He read about occamies. They preferred small game, such as insects and birds. Rodents.

Monty looked at the baby occamy again. Based on the plumage, it was female. The book said they had a wingspan up to fifteen feet, fully grown, but annoyingly did not say at what age an occamy was *fully grown*. It could have been a matter of centuries, or a matter of minutes. Thankfully, his occamy hadn't gone past two feet, and had in fact shrunk once wrangled into Hedwig's cage. Less than twelve hours old, and already she was adapting.

Monty shut the book. The scant information it had would work for someone who might run into an occamy in the wild, but it had very little in the way of raising an occamy. There was nothing Monty could do, other than hiss at the occamy and keep her contained. Hopefully Harry would write back. Hopefully Sirius would pick him up soon.

He checked the time, dismayed at the early hour. He wasn't tired, though. Soon after the occamy had been delivered, and Hedwig had flown sleepily away, three owls arrived bearing gifts. Hoping for gifts more reasonable than an occamy, Monty had eagerly opened the packages from Ron, Hermione, and Hagrid. All of them had, to his utter bewilderment, sent cakes.

Monty could tell the cake from Ron was baked by Mrs. Weasley. The cake from Hermione was a box mix. He could picture Hermione trying to make one from scratch—without magic—growing frustrated and resorting to the mix. Monty didn't mind it, it was something he'd rarely had. A novelty. Aunt Petunia had resorted to box mixes in the past, as the quickest way to shut Dudley up was to distract him with food. This was a technique Aunt Petunia relied on so heavily that it was detrimental to his cousin's health. Monty had been conscripted more than once to make such a cake.

Hagrid had sent rock cakes.

Monty had no idea how he was going to store it all. Of the three, only Mrs. Weasley's was magically preserved. Using the fridge downstairs was out of the question, it'd all be gone by midday.

At a loss, Monty flopped on his bed. The occamy *was* great. For all the immediate issues she presented, she was a fascinating creature. She hunted *rats*. Monty had recently developed a hatred towards that particular rodent. And she spoke parseltongue. He could talk to her. Who else would have thought to give him a serpent friend? Who else even knew?

Monty rolled over to look at his occamy, smiling as the morning sunlight glinted off her scales. There was something else about occamies he was forgetting.

Her little claws flexed in her sleep, as if she were already dreaming about eviscerating rats.

He sat bolt upright.

Occamies. Snakes. Slytherin. Harry's friends waving a banner. A sparkling occamy in silver and green, rising above the Forbidden Forest.

Harry had sent him the Slytherin mascot.

Monty didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Before he could decide, the doorbell rang and Aunt Petunia was shrieking about a motorbike in her driveway.

Harry took his punishment in stride. It was such a novel experience, a parent giving him consequences. His gran, before she was ill, had never had the occasion to, other than a timeout here or there. After she was ill...Harry didn't like thinking about it. He had helped her often, true, but some days he had been awful. Crying, screaming, refusing to help with anything, blaming her, making impossible demands, his sick grandmother struggling to breathe, to form a response.

It was bad. *He* was bad.

He crossed his arms, turning to the stacks of cauldrons his dad had unearthed. Cauldrons in dire need of repair, the kind of disasters resistant to cleaning charms and potions.

Harry knew there was one way he could assuage his dad, but that would mean exposing Monty's secret. Parselmouths were said to wield influence over serpents, Slytherin and his basilisk being a prime example of that. Harry was reasonably confident his brother could communicate with the occamy, reign in its more murderous tendencies. Become allies. Friends. They could protect each other.

He grabbed the first cauldron, frowning at the crystalline growths within. He'd have to chip it out, whatever it was. He adjusted the rolled up mandrake leaf in his mouth, unhappy with how soggy it had got. He didn't know how his dad managed to hide his so well.

"...Your younger brother, who lives in a muggle neighborhood, in a house filled with muggles, with only a squib to watch over him..."

That was *exactly* why Monty needed more than an owl at his side.

Grabbing a chisel, Harry began hacking at the growth. To his disgust, they were not actual crystals. The growths were fleshy, and the chisel sliced right through the mass. It oozed a putrid yellow liquid that wouldn't look out of place in a gobstone.

Harry gave the ooze a considering look, then set the chisel down and summoned a vial. At least he could get something out of this.

Monty sagged with relief when he walked into Grimmauld Place. He would take screaming, bigoted portraits and surly house-elves over the Dursleys any day. At least Sirius' mum and Kreacher were interesting.

"Most of the rooms are still closed," Sirius said, leading Monty up the grand staircase, his trunk floating ahead. He studiously avoided looking at the house-elf heads mounted on the wall. Someone had taken the time to dust them. Kreacher, Monty assumed. They were his taxidermied predecessors, after all.

The first time Monty had visited Grimmauld Place, he had been impressed by its size, its menace, and how inconceivably filthy it was. Sirius had been cleaning it since being discharged from St. Mungo's. For months. Monty suspected the house, and the ancient house-elf, fought back. He had no idea what had changed between Sirius and Kreacher, but the results were obvious. The air was no longer choked with dust, the other portraits had clean canvases and polished frames, the runner wasn't trying to eat him. He could see out of a window. It was a vast improvement.

"You're getting my old room," Sirius continued as they ascended. "Kreacher has turned my brother's room into a shrine, which is a shame since he's got the en-suite."

Monty nodded, not knowing what an *en-suite* was. "I'm just glad to be here."

Sirius smiled winningly at him. "Keep out of the attic, too. That's where we've been storing the darker artifacts."

Monty hesitated on the landing. "We? You and Kreacher?"

Sirius' smile faded. "I've been talking to Remus," he said, addressing this to a firmly shut door. Monty looked at the door, and saw there was a small, handwritten sign on it.

Sirius shook his head, waving Monty down the hall. Monty looked at the sign again.

Without the Express Permission of

Regulus Arcturus Black

He glanced at Sirius. What was it like, to know he would never get *express permission* again?

Monty swallowed nervously, readjusting the cage he held. He'd thrown one of Dudley's old shirts over it and had yet to remove it. Thankfully, his occamy was still asleep. Being born took a lot out of you.

"He's in the kitchen," Sirius said, startling Monty from his thoughts. What had he missed?

"Professor Lupin?" he hazarded.

Sirius gave an incredulous *pfft*. "Call him Remus. *Professor...*"

Shaking his head, Sirius opened the last door in the hall, and stood back so Monty could see in.

"You can change anything you want," Sirius said, making a vague gesture to the most aggressively decorated room Monty had seen in his short life. Everything was red and gold and lions, warmed by sunlight streaming in from a window. It was very...Gryffindor.

Hedwig hooted from the ornately carved headboard of a massive bed.

"I've been meaning to ask," Sirius said, leaning down. "Your owl's here, so what's in the cage?"

Professor Lupin stared at the occamy. Sirius' reaction, an altogether appropriate one in Monty's opinion, had roused the little occamy from her slumber. She was looking around at everything, making curious little hisses that Sirius was unnerved by.

"Maybe Hagrid?" Professor Lupin suggested, marginally less discomposed. "Where did you say you got this, Monty?"

Monty opened his mouth, but had no ready explanation. Would Harry get in trouble?

"There was an egg," Monty said slowly. "And then it hatched."

"As eggs are wont to do," Sirius said drily. "If you don't want to tell us, that's fine."

"Sirius—"

“We have other things to talk about, Remus,” Sirius said, giving him a loaded look. “And it’s Monty’s birthday.”

Professor Lupin gave Sirius a faint smile, then turned to Monty. “Is it too early for cake?”

A towering cake appeared on the table. Monty thought he was inured to the sudden appearance of food, yet he reeled back. His falling chair was arrested in its momentum by a bemused Professor Lupin.

“Thanks,” Monty said, sitting back up to admire his third-and-a-half cake of the day. It was a tiered chocolate monstrosity. “Did you make this, professor?”

Sirius groaned. “It’s *Remus*.”

“Monty may refer to me however he wishes,” Professor Lupin said, as plates and cutlery appeared on the table. They were much nicer than what Kreacher typically set out. “And no, I did not. This was all Kreacher’s doing.”

“Filthy mongrel,” came a muttered imprecation, from the shadows in which Kreacher dwelt. Monty hadn’t even noticed him there. The mark of good house-elf, so he had been told.

“None of that language, Kreacher,” Sirius said sharply. “Remember our agreement?”

Kreacher muttered darkly, but did not expound upon *filthy mongrel*.

“It does bring up the matter I wish to discuss,” Professor Lupin said, passing a knife to Monty. Monty took it, having no idea what he was meant to do with it. “I find bad news is better received with chocolate.”

Monty looked at the knife in his hand, then to Professor Lupin. “Bad news?”

Professor Lupin sighed. “There’s something I want to tell you, Monty. It has to do with why I...” he looked at Sirius, whose face had grown stony. “Why I never sought you out. Other than Dumbledore having hidden you with your muggle relatives.”

Sirius snorted. “If a half-mad, *filthy mongrel* fresh out of Azkaban could work it out—”

Professor Lupin cleared his throat. “I’m a werewolf.”

“Oh,” Monty said, not sure how he was supposed to react. “That’s cool. I mean,” he said quickly, “I don’t care that you’re a werewolf.”

Sirius laughed. “I told you he wouldn’t care!”

Professor Lupin sighed. “Suffice to say, most do not think it is *cool*,” he said, smiling sadly at Monty. “I would appreciate it if you kept this information to yourself.”

“Yeah, of course I will,” Monty said. “It’s nobody’s business but your own, right?” He bit his tongue before he could say more, not wanting to sour the mood further. What did being a werewolf have to do with visiting him? Or at least letting Monty know he *existed*?

Sirius reached over and mussed up his hair, and Monty half-heartedly batted him away.

“That’s exactly how James and I reacted,” Sirius said. For a moment, Sirius’ eyes grew distant, then he refocused and smiled at Monty. “Now that the wolf’s out of the bag, tell Monty about the other news!”

“Right,” Professor Lupin—Remus?—said, reaching into his robes. “An owl came while Sirius was picking you up. From the Minister for Magic.” He pulled out a light blue pamphlet. It was difficult to read, given all the small, moving symbols, all different colors, and the radiant emblem in the center, but Monty could just make out the word *quidditch*.

“What is it?” Monty asked, setting the knife down. Kreacher made a strangled noise from his dark corner.

Sirius slapped the table. “Tickets to the Quidditch World Cup! Top Box!”

“Really?” Monty said excitedly. “I thought it was sold out!”

“Heard that from your friend in Slytherin?” Sirius asked, looking at the occamy suspiciously. Kreacher muttered something, and the knife flew into Monty’s hand.

“I don't know what I’m supposed to do with this,” Monty said, exasperated. Professor Lupin was a werewolf, Quidditch World Cup tickets, occamies...

“Young master is meant to cut the first slice,” Kreacher said bitterly. Monty was glad Sirius had convinced the old elf to put on a clean loincloth, particularly if he was taking over food preparation.

“Oh, right,” Monty said, regarding the towering cake once more. Which tier was he supposed to start at? Did he cut the whole thing? “How?”

Professor Lupin smiled warmly at him. “Let’s start with the top, shall we?”

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Sorry it took a while, I have a lot of stuff going on. I'll answer a few questions I noticed

1. I don't have a set update schedule. In the past, it was one, two, or three times a day. I'll probably get back to that in a few weeks.
2. The test was a joke. Like, the bar is in hell. It does not bode well.
3. I missed you all too :)

I can't wait for summer.

Salt and Vinegar

Chapter Summary

August 1st, 1994

“Weatherby!”

Percy stopped walking, turning so quickly the jars of counterfeit floo powder almost crashed into a wall. One vial contained powdered erumpent horn, confiscated from a hag in Knockturn. It was a Class B Tradeable Material, and though less volatile than the explosive fluid an erumpent’s horn contained, could still level a small house. The thought of the paperwork he’d have to fill out...

“Yes, Mr. Crouch?”

Bartemius Crouch Sr, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, had emerged from his office. Every line of Mr. Crouch’s body spoke of control. He had a strict part in his grey hair, and a moustache so exact it could be used as a level. His robes were impeccably pressed, and his shoes shone with polish. His gaunt frame gave him the look of an ascetic, which Percy attributed to a life of absolute discipline. He felt gauche and disheveled next to Mr. Crouch. His hair would never accept such a part, his body would never be so obedient.

Mr. Crouch had sent his own son to Azkaban. His son’s involvement with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had cost Mr. Crouch his career. Yet, unlike others in the Ministry, Mr. Crouch did not hold himself outside of the law. Each of them, every magical person, had to respect the law, the rules of conduct they created for themselves, or risk the exposure of their world, a return to the days of witch-hunts and burnings.

Percy had nearly snapped under the pressure of holding his siblings accountable to Hogwarts rules. Was he capable of sending one of them to Azkaban?

“Greengrass is out today,” Mr. Crouch said, interrupting Percy’s thoughts. “You will be taking minutes at the meeting this afternoon, Weatherby.”

It was galling that Mr. Crouch didn’t know his name yet. Percy hadn’t wanted to show the older man any disrespect, nor gainsay him, but advancing in the Ministry required people knowing who he was. He could hear Auntie Muriel’s cackle.

“Yes, sir,” Percy said. “And it’s Weasley, sir.”

“Arthur?” Mr. Crouch asked, turning around as if Percy’s father was just behind him.

“Arthur Weasley is my father,” Percy clarified. He wondered in what way it *wasn't* obvious that he was a Weasley. It was an insubordinate thought. If he wanted to be respected as an authority, Percy needed to respect authority in turn. The conceit would otherwise fall apart.

Mr. Crouch nodded absently. “Excellent, Weatherby. After the meeting, draft an interdepartmental bulletin regarding the announcement.”

“Announcement, sir?”

But Mr. Crouch shut his door again, too busy to indulge Percy’s curiosity, and apparently without his secretary that day.

Percy continued on his way to Mr. Jordan’s office, using his wand to carefully float the various fake floor powders down the hall, thinking about what he needed to make a written record of the upcoming meeting. Did he have a dicta-quill at his desk?

Harry watched intently as Mr. Montgomery pointed his wand. His target was an empty can of Carling which someone had stepped on.

After a month of sorting mail and gathering rubbish, the moment had finally arrived. It was his first full day back in the office, and this was it. Harry would finally see a portkey being made.

Mr. Montgomery had a fantastically bored expression when he said, “*Portus.*”

Harry’s eyes never left the dented can. The can shuddered, then glowed with a scintillating blue light, before returning to the state Harry had found it in.

Mr. Montgomery gave Harry a puzzled look, then sent the can flying into its sorting bin. “Did you need something, Evans?”

“No, sir,” Harry said, continuing to his cubicle. The deadline for portkey requests was past, and portkeys were being made in earnest. The entire office was mobilized, save the underage wizard who didn’t know the spell.

“That’s 99p well spent,” Harry muttered. He sat at his desk and stared at the interminable stack of papers he still needed to sort. It had somehow grown taller in his absence.

That was it?

How long would it take him to reverse engineer the spell from its incantation? He briefly thought about asking his dad. Given he’d sent his brother an occamy the day before, Harry didn’t think his dad would be amenable to teaching him to make a portkey, for fear he’d send one to Monty.

A letter from his brother had come with the owl post that morning. Harry had perhaps been hasty in sending his brother an occamy. It could have waited twelve hours. He pulled the letter from his robes, smiling faintly to himself as he reread it.

Dear Harry,

I reckon I should tell you I don't need help anymore, with the occamy I mean. Who sends someone an occamy?

She's amazing, I should say that too. I named her Hester, though Sirius keeps calling her Hisster. I had to leave her at home today—not the Dursleys, I'm somewhere else. I can't say where. Professor Lupin's here too. Sirius wants me to call him Remus, but it's strange, right? He's my professor.

We went to that muggle botanic garden with Neville, it was—

“Evans.”

Harry closed his eyes briefly, folding the letter as casually as he could. He shouldn't have brought it to work.

“Weasley,” he said, turning to look up at Percy.

Harry hadn't seen Percy since Hamlet. The play had, predictably, ended in tragedy. Seeing Percy again revived the thoughts Harry had avoided thinking. The hope that had died in his fourth year had been rekindled with a vengeance. It scared him. Harry didn't want to get hurt again. And he knew he wasn't being subtle. He watched Percy too closely, letting things slip just to see how Percy would react.

“You're back in the office,” Percy said, pushing up his horn-rimmed glasses.

“Just for today,” Harry said. “Staff meeting.”

“Right,” Percy said.

A moment passed where Harry simply looked at Percy. At his hair, parted to one side. His glasses with their loose arms. The freckles, almost close enough to count. Harry desperately wanted to kiss every single one, to trace the abstract shapes they made across Percy's fair skin with his—

“Are you able to meet during lunch?” Percy asked.

“I am,” Harry said, standing up. He barely came to Percy's shoulders, but had never felt short in his presence. He reached for the packed lunch he had brought, in the hopes he would see

Percy. “I’ve got—”

“There is an establishment I wish to patronize,” Percy interrupted, pushing his glasses up again. Would he let Harry try to repair them? Perhaps, if Harry was bold enough to ask.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “What did it do to you?”

Percy gave him an unamused look. “I believe the muggles call it a *chippy*.”

With an absent wave, Harry cast a preservation charm over the packed lunch. His dad’s growing collection of culinary magic literature was a goldmine.

“Is the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery a joke to you?” Percy asked, pushing his glasses up even further to pinch his nose. “Honestly, Evans. It’s people like you who keep the Improper Use of Magic Office in business.”

“That decree is worth less than the parchment it’s written on,” Harry said, grinning at Percy. “And I’ve got a special dispensation, Weasley.”

Percy sighed. “I should report this.”

Harry started walking towards the lifts, knowing Percy wouldn’t.

Harry upended a bottle of malt vinegar over his fried fish, humming a catchy tune to himself. He picked up a chip, dipped it into a small plastic cup of tartare.

Percy was transfixed.

“What song is that?” he asked. He had to stop thinking about the cheeky look Harry had given him in the lift, whipping off his black robes to reveal a muggle outfit underneath. Dragonhide boots, black trousers torn at the knees, revealing a patchwork of scars gained from Harry’s skateboarding. A shirt Percy had never seen before, but distantly recognized as the Wigtown Wanderers’ emblem. Harry was moving something around in his mouth, which Percy found incredibly distracting.

Harry looked up at him. “Fish and chips and vinegar.”

Did Harry think he was daft? “I am capable of recognizing muggle foods.”

Harry shook his head. “That’s not what I meant. It’s the name of the song. *Fish and Chips and Vinegar*.” Harry set the bottle of vinegar down, and sang, “Fish and chips and vinegar, vinegar, vinegar. Fish and chips and vinegar. Pepper, pepper, pepper, salt.”

Percy stared at him for a moment, then collected himself. “I see.”

Harry smiled, then pointed his fork at Percy's own basket of greasy food. "It's better when it's hot."

"Right," Percy said, giving a pot of mushy peas a dubious look.

"Glad we got a table," Harry said, abandoning the fork to take apart his fish with his fingers. Beneath its vinegar-sodden exterior, the fish was flaky and white. It smelled divine. "Though I wouldn't have minded eating in a park."

"Indeed," Percy said faintly. Their outing had the timbre of a fever dream, had left him with a sense of melancholy he struggled to define.

When Penelope and her parents had taken him to muggle events, he could hardly recall what happened. The suffocating pressure to perform, to emulate their lofty airs, to smile indulgently at the muggles and their mundane pageantry; the act had consumed him.

With Harry, every moment had been seared into his memory.

Percy cleared his throat, then picked up his own fork to cut into his portion of fish. "The ICW conference has concluded."

Harry swallowed, then nodded. "Yeah, I read the article this morning. Set troll rights back by a century, at least."

"Not necessarily," Percy said. "Which sauce should I use?"

"Try them all," Harry suggested. "At the same time. And what do you mean?"

Percy was in no hurry to discover what a pint of vinegar would do to his digestive system, and opted for the tartare. "The ICW lacks enforcement power."

"I know," Harry said. "You think the Wizengamot won't pass that resolution as soon as they're back in session? They've got it out for so-called *creatures*," he added with a faint sneer.

"I admit, it seems likely," Percy said, eyeing the tartare. The white sauce, mixed with mysterious chunks of green, was off-putting. Harry kept dipping his chips into it. Percy trusted Harry's judgment in all things. He placed the edge of his fish into the tartare and withdrew. The chippy, nameless other than the large sign that read *FISH & CHIPS*, had been his idea. Another foray into muggle culture. He would try everything, even the mushy peas.

Harry watched him expectantly, waiting for him to finish his thought.

"Trolls don't have representation in the ICW," Percy said. "I highly doubt they are aware of its proceedings. If they were, they would disregard them."

"It's not about what the trolls would do," Harry said chidingly. "It's what it would enable witches and wizards to do. At what point does trophy hunting become murder? How sentient does the victim have to be?"

He...enjoyed listening to Harry talk. It had got him through many agonizing meals at the Ravenclaw table, his position as Penelope's charity case. "I was under the impression you did not care for trolls."

Harry gave him an incredulous look. "What does that have to do with the price of dragon livers?"

Percy shook his head. "No, you're right. The implementation is typically more strict than what the ICW outlines. I was thinking of the practical impact. If it leads to an increase in hunting trolls for sport, its popularity will wane with the rise in casualties among hunters."

Harry laughed. Percy enjoyed making him laugh.

"Shame the same thing can't be said about the Werewolf Capture Unit. They only *capture* werewolves after a full moon. Are you going to eat that?"

Percy jerked, then lifted the fork to his mouth. The batter had been fried golden. The checkered paper it had been served in had absorbed the oil, leaving it crispy and light. The fish underneath melted like butter in his mouth, its flesh sweet and delicate. The creamy tang of the tartare made Percy close his eyes in appreciation. He'd never tasted such a combination of flavors. If he had come alone, he would have not been so bold as to experiment.

"Good, isn't it?" Harry asked, smiling at him.

Percy nodded mutely, then took another bite.

There weren't enough chairs in the meeting room, so Harry stood. He leaned against the wall, unobtrusively observing the crowd. If he were being honest, he was primarily watching Percy. Percy was taking notes with remarkable speed, seated close to his department head, Mr. Crouch.

As an intern, Harry had not been expected to attend any meetings, other than with his direct superiors. He had nothing to contribute, and most of what was discussed was irrelevant to someone whose job description amounted to *magical binman*. If he didn't have Percy to ogle, he would have been bored out of his gourd.

"That concludes the vendor application matter," Mr. Crouch said, tapping a gavel Harry suspected had been nicked from the Wizengamot's chambers. "Now, Basil, how is progress on the short-distance apparition permits?"

Harry sank back into the wall as Mr. Montgomery, who sounded harassed after making hundreds of portkeys, gave an exhaustive account of how the short-distance apparition permits were progressing. It felt vindictive.

“They could’ve sent an owl,” someone next to Harry grumbled. He was startled to see it was Captain Lament, who was playing with two caustic red gobstones like baoding balls, rotating them around each other in her hand.

“Why are you here?” Harry whispered.

Captain Lament sighed in annoyance. “An owl from Jorkins came in. She’s extended her holiday to take care of a sick aunt.” Captain Lament rolled her eyes. “I was the only one in the department not doing something Quidditch World Cup-related.”

Harry smiled at the venom in her voice in having been made to say *quidditch*. “You’ll be back to polishing gobstones in no time.”

The gavel clacked again. “That concludes the World Cup section of our meeting,” Mr. Crouch said. “Now, as some of you may know, a certain event will be hosted at—”

Someone cleared their throat. “We’ve got interns here, Barty.”

Mr. Crouch blinked, then he narrowed his eyes to scan the crowd. He found Harry with unnerving accuracy.

“Any current students must leave the room,” Mr. Crouch said. Captain Lament scoffed, but Harry wasn’t invested enough in the meeting to care.

“Who is that young man?” Mr. Crouch asked. “One of yours, Basil?”

“Go on, Evans,” Mr. Montgomery said, nodding to the door.

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, glancing at Percy one last time before making his escape.

Percy watched Harry leave, followed by Charity Lament, who he knew had graduated the year before. Well, it was none of his concern.

He turned back to Mr. Crouch, quill lifted in anticipation.

“As the ICW conference has concluded,” Mr. Crouch said, “we have received confirmation from the French and Norwegian Ministries.”

Mr. Crouch paused, smugly appraising his audience as the tension grew.

At his next words, Percy dropped his quill.

Severus chuckled darkly at the paper he held, relishing Rita Skeeter's article on the month-long International Confederation of Wizards conference for the third time that day. Lady Madeleine gave a questioning mewl from her cardboard box. In a rare display of fondness, Severus scratched her ears.

"The author refers to the headmaster as a *dingbat*," Severus explained, closing the paper. He'd frame the article later. "The headmaster could have been Minister, you know."

Lady Madeleine blinked at him. She did not know. She was a cat.

Severus shook his head. He was losing his mind.

"For your own edification, I shall explain," he said. "You cannot be a representative in the ICW if you hold public office. Dumbledore currently enjoys a seat as Supreme Mugwump. He is the chairman of the magical world's most influential organization. In addition to being the headmaster, as you know."

Lady Madeleine yawned. She did know.

"I ask you this," Severus said. "Which do you think is the superior position, Minister or Mugwump?"

Lady Madeleine's response was lost to a silvery-blue cat bursting into the living room.

"I need you at the school," McGonagall's voice said. "Immediately."

Severus was through the floo before the patronus could vanish.

Harry arrived home in a sour mood. Whatever had been announced at the meeting had everyone walking on eggshells. He hadn't seen Percy again before being let off for the day, and was a bit annoyed at Captain Lament for not staying for the news. Percy was too honorable to reveal any information entrusted to him, but Captain Lament had no such scruples.

Sighing, Harry walked into the kitchen, expecting to see his dad. But the kitchen was empty. Dinner had not been made.

"Dad?" Harry asked, leaving the kitchen. The living room was empty too, save for Lady Madeleine who was stretched before the fire. Her tail lashed.

Harry checked the lab in the basement. Nothing but cauldrons. Unwilling to breach his dad's privacy and check the hidden staircase that led upstairs, Harry returned to the living room.

“Do you know where he is?” he asked Lady Madeleine.

“Meow.”

Harry looked at the fireplace expectantly, but his dad did not appear.

He sighed again. “I’ll get dinner started.”

Severus watched Charity throw back another shot of firewhiskey. They were in the Hog’s Head, following the shitshow that had been their emergency staff meeting. He imagined Dumbledore was enjoying chivito while the rest of them were in a state of panic.

“I can’t believe Beauxbatons would agree to this,” Charity said, pouring herself another shot. “Durmstrang, obviously. But Beauxbatons?”

“Rivalry,” Severus said, “brings out the worst in us.”

“Cheers,” Charity replied, downing her shot. “Thank god for the age limit, eh? At least the lucky kid who gets maimed or murdered will be *of age*.”

Severus eyed the bottle. His relationship with alcohol was complicated. He never wanted Harry to see him inebriated, not like he had seen his own father. Stumbling, slurring, cursing, throwing things, extracting the price of his shame and resentment from his wife and son.

He nursed his own drink.

“I thought Dumbledore was full of it,” Charity said, frowning at her shot glass. “*I believe it is a wonderful idea*,” she added in a mocking tone. “What a massive cunt.”

Severus chuckled. The wisdom of holding the Triwizard Tournament aside, he was grateful Harry and his brother were too young to participate.

“Those poor house-elves have to add *dress robes* to all the school letters,” Charity said, shaking her head in sorrow.

“They are the true victims of this,” Severus said solemnly.

Charity playfully kicked him under the table. He was too surprised to react.

“We should do this more often,” she said idly, her stormy blue eyes sparkling at him. The dimples had made a reappearance. Severus pushed his drink aside. Clearly, he had had too much.

“Discuss the incompetence of those the world deemed fit to position above us in the social hierarchy?” Severus asked.

Charity's eyes widened, and she leaned forward eagerly. "Severus Snape, are you flirting with me?"

Severus gave his drink a withering look. Next time, he was sticking to water.

Percy's head spun with the events of the day. The Triwizard Tournament. It had been over three hundred years since the last one, for good reason. The death toll had grown astronomical, and not only among the champions. Often the audience was collateral damage.

He apparated home with a stack of paper and scrolls. He wouldn't be directly involved in arranging the tournament, but he had been given a promotion of sorts. First stand-in secretary for Mr. Crouch, now his research load had increased. It was a shame his salary wasn't positively impacted, but he had seen how hard his father had worked to get to where he was. Percy was ready, willing, and able. Hard work was its own reward.

The Burrow glowed warm with candlelight. He could smell his mother's cooking wafting from the kitchen, hear the conspiratorial chittering of the garden gnomes, a scream that cut off when Hermes snatched one up, Ron and Ginny arguing about something. He adjusted the scrolls he carried and continued up the garden path, wondering if it would have behooved him to stay in the office.

"Percy's back," Ginny shouted once he was inside. He assumed she had won the argument, given the copy of *Quidditch Times* she held. It was one of the many things his siblings had to share; they couldn't afford more than one copy of the monthly magazine.

"Is your father back yet?" his mother shouted.

Instead of shouting back, Percy walked to the kitchen, depositing the work he'd brought home on the table. Ron was already sat there, doing something unspeakable with biscuits and tea. "Father was delayed. Mr. Bagman needed to speak with him."

"Is that so?" his mother asked, smiling at him. "Good to see you, dear. How was work?"

"Interesting," Percy said. Ron snorted.

"Let me fix you some tea," his mother said, reaching for her wand. There was an *oink*, and it turned into a small rubber pig.

His mother shrieked, throwing the rubber pig across the room. "Fred! George! You two get in here *this instant!*"

Not wanting to be in the crossfire, Percy quickly carried his things to his room and cast a silencing charm before the shouting began.

School Letters

Chapter Summary

August 1994

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your comments! They really brighten my day :)

Severus arrived home so late it could be considered morning. While his time with Charity had been...diverting...and had helped assuage some of his annoyance at yet another event calculated to distract his already abysmal students, it had all come crashing back when he had left her presence.

And he had neglected to leave a note for Harry.

He exited the floo, stepping over Lady Madeleine, who gave him a reproachful look. He frowned at the grey cat, wondering why she had remained at Spinner's End rather than accompany Harry home. He crossed his arms and walked to the kitchen. There was no point in going to sleep; coffee and potions would see him through the day. Surely the boy hadn't—

Severus froze in the doorway, his arms tightening around himself. Harry was at the kitchen table, asleep. Two plates were sat before him, one at Severus' place. He could see wispy traces of steam above the bowls. Tomato soup, and he could smell the bread in the oven. Harry hadn't eaten. He had waited for Severus to return.

He had rarely seen his son asleep. Harry looked younger, more innocent. Though his breathing was even, Harry's brow was furrowed, and his hands were clenched into fists.

A nightmare.

Severus walked over, dismissing his unstable emotions, and gently placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. He sat bolt upright, grabbing his wand from the table.

"I apologize for my absence," Severus said, withdrawing his hand.

Harry gave him a bleary look, then relaxed in his chair. "Are you okay?"

"I am fine," Severus said, moving around the table to sit down. He had never seen anyone wake so quickly. How worried had he made his son? "I cannot say the same thing for one of

your peers.”

“Who?” Harry asked, sitting up. “Did something happen?”

Severus noted the wand still clutched in Harry’s hand. “Not yet. The school received word that we will play host to the Triwizard Tournament this year.”

Harry groaned and tipped his head back. “So that’s why I got kicked out of the meeting. It’s supposed to be some big secret?” He sat up again with a startled look. Severus was amused by the honesty of Harry’s reactions. His growing mastery of occlumency made his son sometimes difficult to read. It was comforting to see him so open. He didn’t want Harry to tread carefully around him.

“Hang on,” Harry said. “Wasn’t that banned for, you know, killing kids?”

Severus humphed. “We were told precautions would be taken.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Like what?”

“I shall explain as we eat,” Severus said, summoning the loaf of bread from the oven. Somehow, the food his son made tasted better than anything a centuries-old house-elf could cook.

Percy spotted Harry walking through the Atrium. He had lingered near the Fountain of Magical Brethren, and could not think of a less fitting name for the eyesore. It was early, too early to justify Percy having already arrived, but he knew the hours Harry kept.

“Good morning,” Harry said with a faint smile.

Percy’s heart skipped a beat, and he looked Harry over before he could reconsider the action. Harry had dressed in muggle clothes, reasonable given he was back in the field delivering portkeys. His eyes were drawn to Harry’s hands, his nails still inexplicably varnished black. What would his hands look like beringed?

“Why are you here so early?” Harry asked, adjusting his bag. “I’ve got time for a coffee before I floo to Tenby.”

“Wales?” Percy asked, following Harry back to the bank of fireplaces. He hadn’t known Harry had a floo connection, wherever he lived. Was he staying at the Leaky Cauldron again?

“Slaw Cram’s got indigestion,” Harry said over his shoulder. Percy noted the dark circles under his eyes. Had Harry stopped sleeping again? “Mr. Montgomery says it’s the stress getting to him. I say he needs to put less vinegar in his coleslaw.”

“You’re one to talk,” Percy murmured.

“I heard that,” Harry said, turning around to grin at him. To Percy’s horror, Harry seized his wrist and dragged him to a fireplace. “Come on, I know a place.”

Percy was not given a chance to protest, and could not hear what Harry called out over the hammering of his heart.

Half an hour later, Percy found himself in a cafe somewhere in Wales, eating *pain au chocolat* with espresso.

“So,” Harry said, dipping his croissant into his milky coffee. Unlike the repulsive manners of Percy's siblings, Harry was a graceful eater. It was enchanting.

Percy swallowed nervously. “So?”

“The Triwizard Tournament,” Harry said.

Percy choked on his croissant. “I beg your pardon?”

“Beg all you’d like, Percy,” Harry said, arching one elegant brow. As his brothers would say, Percy was well and truly fucked.

“Yes, I know about it,” Harry continued, oblivious to Percy’s inner turmoil. “A thousand galleons.” He leaned back in his chair, lifting his coffee contemplatively. “That’s a life-changing amount of money. It’s tempting. Shame I won’t be able to participate.”

“As Mr. Crouch put it, it’s a matter of consent and equity,” Percy said, recovering. “It also limits the foreign students who will be staying at the school.”

He had, admittedly, thought along the same lines as Harry. He was a year too old, Harry a year too young. Given Harry was frighteningly adept at magic, a genius, outstripping Percy’s classmates even in his third year, Percy doubted the Triwizard Tournament would have posed much of a challenge.

“It limits liability,” Harry said, sitting back up. “The whole point is to improve international relations, at least from the Ministry’s perspective. Imagine if a student from another school died. It would be a nightmare.”

Harry gazed wistfully out of the window. A thousand galleons. There were students and families who needed that sort of money. Percy’s family. Harry.

“At least Cassius will be able to enter,” Harry said, turning back to smile at Percy. “His birthday’s in October.”

Only the oldest sixth-years would be allowed to participate, Percy knew. Harry’s friend, Warrington. Cedric Diggory.

Percy frowned. If an imbecile like Diggory was permitted to risk his life for a pile of coins and some transient glory, why not Harry?

Monty pointed his wand at his baby occamy. Hester hissed garbled words at him.

“I can’t take you with me if I don’t do this,” Monty hissed back. “There’d be riots!”

He had reread Harry’s letter until every word was memorized. In response to Monty’s plea for help, Harry had sent him his notes on the Disillusionment charm he had developed for Frankie, a modification that allowed the caster alone to see the target.

“*Sundorcýppe*,” Monty said, still uncertain of the pronunciation. It would be so much easier if Harry was there to show him. He had hoped that, maybe, they’d be able to spend part of summer together. The summer before third year was the best he’d ever had. But Harry was busy with his internship, and Monty had Sirius, who he should have had all along.

The charm, which had a lovely pink color, splashed harmlessly against Hester. She cried out in surprise, then launched from her perch to fly around her cage. Monty asked Sirius to enlarge it for him. Hedwig was consigned to the windowsill, her eyes trained on the occamy.

The charm had failed. Again.

Monty threw himself onto his bed, frustrated. He didn’t want to leave Hester behind when he went back to school. He knew Sirius would take care of her. Or Kreacher, even if occamies were one of their natural predators. Harry had assured him that, as a parselmouth, serpents were magically compelled to listen to him. Obey him, though the idea made Monty sick to his stomach. Hester was already showing off her size-changing ability, so he wouldn’t have to worry about the logistics of a fifteen-foot flying serpent in his dormitory.

There was also that he had told no one about being a parselmouth. Not Ron, nor Hermione. Not Sirius. Monty knew the reputation parselmouths had. He had heeded Harry’s warning in second year, and in his unending quest to feel less lost and stupid in the magical world, Monty had done some research. Had Hermione known, she would have been proud.

Herpo the Foul, dark wizard.

Salazar Slytherin, dark wizard.

Noctua Gaunt, dark witch.

Voldemort, dark wizard.

Monty Potter, Boy Who Lived.

No one even *suspected* he was a parselmouth. Monty was careful, extremely careful, when addressing Hester whenever Sirius or Professor Lupin were around. It upset Hester; she was brand new to the world and didn’t understand why he had to be circumspect.

While he liked Sirius, and Professor Lupin, well enough, and both had been friends with his parents, he had no idea how they would react to his ability. About him having something in

common with Voldemort.

Monty moped for a while. Secrets within secrets. Had he told Ron and Hermione about Sirius? Neville knew, as had everyone at Neville's party. He'd told Luna about it too, though she often knew things others didn't. Monty could only assume every witch and wizard over Sirius' age did, given how close Sirius had been to both of his parents, and how small their community was. Had it already been written about in the *Daily Prophet*?

He hadn't told his friends about the Quidditch World Cup tickets either.

Monty groaned and rolled onto his stomach. It was better to get ahead of it, before Ron and Hermione found out from someone else.

There was a ruckus at the window, and Monty sat up to see what all the fuss was about. An owl had unseated Hedwig from her makeshift perch. A school owl.

The tawny bird ignored Hedwig's annoyed hoot, flapping over to Monty's bed with the letter.

"Thanks," Monty said, wishing he had something to offer the owl. It was an odd time for the school letter to arrive, midday and barely a week into August. The owl didn't care. He ruffled his feathers and flew away, ignoring both Hedwig and Hester.

Monty weighed the letter in his hand, examined the crest pressed into its wax seal. Even with his school things scattered about his room, the magical paraphernalia, there was a lingering fear that the school wouldn't allow him back. That magic would be taken from him as easily as it had been given.

After some more mulling over *what* to tell *who* and *when*, Monty ventured downstairs to find Sirius, and possibly Professor Lupin. Professor Lupin was still staying with his father in Wales, but had been at Grimmauld Place several times since Monty's arrival.

Monty knew that Sirius was angry, that Professor Lupin felt guilty. There wasn't anything Monty could do about it, and it was their business anyway.

The house was looking better with each passing day. Sirius didn't care about Monty using magic during the summer. If anything, he encouraged it. When he grew too frustrated with the charm, Monty could practice cleaning spells. Or his patronus, which Sirius had been a strange mixture of surprised and grateful to see Monty practicing. There was also occlumency, though clearing his mind felt like trying to clean with a dirty rag.

Monty trooped downstairs, ignored the house-elf heads on the wall, and the troll leg, and Sirius' awful mother. He finally found Sirius in the kitchen, having a hushed conversation with Professor Lupin. They stopped as soon as Monty stepped inside.

"That's suspicious," Monty said.

Sirius smiled at him. "Got your school letter, did you?"

“Yeah,” Monty said, hesitating in the doorway. Seeing this, Sirius waved his hand and a chair pulled out from the table.

“We weren’t talking about you, Monty,” Professor Lupin said kindly. “There is an event at Hogwarts this year, which I’ve been instructed to keep secret.”

Monty looked significantly at Sirius.

“I’m not a student,” Sirius said cheerily.

Monty sat down, curious but not desperately so. Harry likely knew about it, whatever it was. He had connections.

“I was thinking of owling Ron and Hermione,” Monty said. “To go to Diagon Alley, I mean.”

“Alright?” Sirius said, glancing at Professor Lupin.

“The thing is,” Monty began, fiddling with his letter. “I haven’t told them about...well, living here. Or about what happened last year, with, you know. Or that you’re my godfather. It’s not that I’m ashamed or anything,” he hastily added. “But he was Ron’s pet! How am I meant to deal with that?”

Professor Lupin didn’t look at Sirius before speaking, which Monty was glad for. “Are you worried about how they’ll react?”

Monty nodded, then said, reluctantly, “I’m worried they won’t be happy for me.”

It was all a mess. Ron’s pet rat had betrayed Monty’s parents, Sirius had slashed up Ron’s bed curtains, and somehow Harry, of everyone in the world, was the one to unravel the entire plot. He *definitely* wasn’t telling Ron that.

“Neville doesn’t mind,” Sirius said. “Neither does that girl you like.”

Monty blushed furiously. “Luna’s my friend!”

“What, so you don’t like your friends?” Sirius teased. “And how do you know I was referring to Miss Luna Lovegood?”

Monty rolled his eyes.

“Owl your friends, Monty,” Sirius said. “Invite them to Diagon Alley. It’ll be fine, and if it’s not, we can leave.”

Monty sighed. It would have been fun to go around Diagon Alley with Harry again. But he *could* invite Neville too. It was a shame Luna was still in Antarctica...

He opened his letter to give the shopping list a look. He read it over, stopping at an unusual addition.

“What do I need dress robes for?”

Harry received his Hogwarts letter while flying over the countryside. The owl was no slouch, landing on his broom—a Nimbus 2000, which he needed to disguise before school—and sticking out her leg. Harry paused midair to accept the letter. He opened it as the owl flew away, mentally checking the shopping list against the books his mum had left behind.

“Dress robes?” he said. “That’d take up half my allowance.”

Lady Madeleine growled in agreement. Harry had been surprised she had wanted to come along with him, as neither cats nor kneazles were avid fliers, but she had insisted. She had a great seat, perfectly balanced on the bristles.

Harry hooked the broom under his knees and fell backwards, his stomach swooping as the world reversed itself. He swung for a moment, but the broom quickly stabilized for him. It was used to more insane maneuvering, courtesy of his reckless little brother.

“I won’t be able to go with Monty this year,” Harry said. “Nor Percy. I bet Astrid—”

A dark shape flew overhead, and Harry watched in stunned silence as a red envelope fell towards him in slow-motion. He scrambled upright, startling Lady Madeleine, snatching the Howler out of the air before it could go off above some unfortunate muggle’s garden.

Astrid lived in Aberdeen. Of course she had got her letter first.

“It’s Hedwig!”

Percy glanced out of the kitchen window, spotting the telltale white form of Fleamont Potter’s owl. She was a gorgeous bird, and strikingly intelligent, but Percy thought it was a poor choice of owl. She was too recognizable, and everyone knew her as Fleamont’s owl.

“Oh, thank goodness,” his mother said, pulling roast vegetables from the oven. “I’ve been thinking of asking your father to visit his aunt and uncle. Goodness knows it’s hard for muggles to raise a magical child!”

Hedwig soared through the window and landed before Ron, offering a letter to him. Ginny cooed over the owl, fascinated by all things Fleamont Potter. Of everything the possession had taken from her, her obsession with the Boy Who Lived had somehow survived.

“What does he say?” his mother asked, charming a serving spoon to deposit roasted brussel sprouts and carrots onto their plates. Percy watched Fred and George exchanging brussel sprouts for carrots, until the vegetables were completely segregated on their individual plates.

“He wants to know if we can go to Diagon Alley this weekend,” Ron said, grinning. “And... he says he’s got a ticket to the Quidditch World Cup!”

“Lucky him,” Fred said, drawing a dark look from their mother.

Ron furrowed his brow. “He says he’s sorry but...he’s going with his *godfather*?” He looked up at them in confusion. “I didn’t know he had a godfather!”

Percy’s mother shared a look with his father. This was getting too close to the matter of a certain rat.

“Sirius Black is his godfather!” Ron shouted, startling Hedwig away from the chicken leg she had been pecking at. “Bloody hell! Wait until Hermione hears this!”

“Oh, Ronald, must you make such a fuss?” their mother tutted. “It’s lovely they get to go to the World Cup together. Don’t you think they deserve it? Especially Sirius, the poor dear.”

Ron muttered, “Could’ve got a ticket for me.”

Their mother ignored this, looking rather distressed. It was a difficult time of year for the Weasleys, when school letters arrived. Their vault would be emptied of what little it had to pay for their school things. Percy was glad he no longer contributed to that burden, even as his supply of litorin dwindled. He needed less of it, though, having most of his meals in the muggle world. Maybe he could skip dinners at home too, if he stayed later at work. If his father would stop coming to Level Five to drag him home.

“We can manage this weekend,” his mother said, nodding decisively. “Is it just Monty, then, or will his godfather be accompanying him?”

“He says he’s staying with him,” Ron said, looking the letter over. “Doesn’t say where, though. And yeah, Sirius Black’s coming along. Monty says he wants to apologize. I reckon I ought to write back.”

Their mother beamed at Ron, and dinner recommenced. The matter was settled.

Diagon Alley. If it was the weekend, technically he had a day off. He would accompany his family, to support his parents. Harry would need to purchase his school things as well. Perhaps they could have dinner together? A work dinner.

There was an odd rumble, a mechanical noise that did not belong at the Burrow. Percy had heard something similar when his father worked in the garage, and when in muggle London. It was a car engine.

“What’s that noise?” his mother said, standing up to look out of the window.

“Maybe the Ford Anglia came to life,” George suggested.

Their mother turned on their father, who denied any involvement.

“I think I see lights,” Ginny said, having joined their mother at the window. “Is someone, what’s it called? Driving up here?”

“Who on earth would?” their mother asked, mystified. “Best go greet them, whoever it is.”

Percy found his wand in his robes, pushing ahead of his younger siblings to join his parents. He ignored their protests, more concerned with a muggle knowing where their family lived, and driving through a magical countryside to reach them. It was bizarre, to say the least.

The car came to a stop, and Percy examined it as if to divine who was within. It was a nice car, as far as he could tell, not as posh as the Rolls-Royce Penelope’s father had rented, but all chrome and tinted windows.

The driver’s window rolled down, and an older man with red hair, cut short and business-like, stuck his head out.

“Molly, is that you?” the man asked in a clipped voice.

Percy’s mother nearly dropped her wand. “Stephen?”

The man nodded, and the window rolled up again. The door opened, and he stepped out. He wore a high quality suit, the kind muggle businessmen wore. Percy’s mother made to approach, but the man had reached for the back door, opening it and pulling something out.

It was a girl, clutching a bulging pink knapsack and a horribly familiar letter.

“She’s one of yours now,” the man, Stephen, said. Before any of them could react, he climbed into the car and backed away. The tires cut precise lines in their lawn as he spun around and drove into the night, leaving his daughter behind.

They watched the car disappear in silence. Percy had no idea what to do. The girl, who looked around Ginny’s age, was short and chubby, with baby-fine red hair in two braids. She squeezed her knapsack as if it were the only thing keeping her together.

Percy’s mother was the first to react. She hurried over to the little girl, who cringed away.

“Hello, love,” she said gently. “I’m, well, I suppose you can call me Aunt Molly. What’s your name, dear?”

The girl scowled at the ground, her pale face blotchy and tear-stained. Percy noted, inanely, that unlike he and his siblings, she lacked freckles. She was, like his mother—

“Mafalda,” the girl finally said, her voice hurt and bitter. “Mafalda Prewett. And I want to go home!”

Then Mafalda started to cry.

Peabutt Buttah

Chapter Summary

August 1994

The family trip to Diagon Alley was postponed until further notice.

Mafalda Prewett had been installed in Bill and Charlie's old room, next to Ginny's. Mafalda had slammed the door shut and resumed crying immediately.

The rest of the family had gradually trickled to their own rooms, uncomfortable with the strange new child in their home, and unsettled by the manner in which she had appeared. Percy remained in the kitchen with his parents. He was old enough to be part of the adult conversations, it seemed. He knew the truth about Scabbers.

"It's good for her to have someone near her age," his mother was saying. She had poured them all tea, but Percy had yet to touch his. He had forwent dinner, using Mafalda's arrival as an excuse.

"It's not the same, Molly," his father said. "You've heard Ron talk about what it was like for Hermione in first year. You remember that letter from Minerva about the bullying? About the *troll*? And she's just been taken from everything she knows!"

His mother shook her head. "I don't understand. Who does that? Who abandons their child?"

Percy could hear Harry's response to that in his head, something he would never dare say aloud to his parents. "*One good turn deserves another.*" The magical world had abandoned Stephen Prewett. When was the last time his mother had even spoken to him? At her wedding, twenty-five years ago? It was astonishing Stephen Prewett had remembered where the Burrow was. It was cruel to take out whatever grudge he held against the magical world on his daughter, but not at all surprising.

"We'll make do, my dear," his father said. "We always do. We could reach out to Aunt Muriel..."

His mother looked stricken. "She hasn't spoken to me since Christmas."

His father sighed. "The dungbomb, right."

"She's one hundred and four years old, Arthur," his mother began.

"As she always reminds us."

“She can't take care of an eleven-year-old girl!”

“We'll contact the school, see what support they can offer. It might do her good to meet another muggleborn, someone close to her age. Hermione, perhaps? Ron wanted to invite her and Monty round this summer.”

His mother wiped her eyes. “He's not a proper muggleborn, Arthur. It's not the same. There's that boy in Ginny's year, Colin Creevey...”

Percy picked up his tea, listening quietly to the conversation. Harry was a muggleborn, one who hadn't completely abandoned the muggle world as so many others did. Even Hermione was steadily withdrawing from her parents. Professor Burbage was another one, someone who skipped down the line between muggle and magical. She would argue there wasn't a line at all. And Harry had mentioned one of the first-year Slytherins. Dominic? Derek? He had a squib mother, and a muggle father, who had told him he was no longer welcome at home.

Since he had yet to be involved in his parents' conversation, Percy retreated to his room, pausing on the first floor landing to listen to Mafalda's muffled sobs. Perhaps things would look better in the morning.

In a show of familial obligation, Percy did not leave before everyone else had woken. He stayed for breakfast, stayed to listen to his mother coax Mafalda from her hastily put together room, explaining who they were, what everything in the house was, what *magic* was. Mafalda was pale and silent, her braids in disarray, standing out in her muggle jeans and horse shirt.

Percy knew his family was...overwhelming. He didn't think folding Mafalda in, like they had with Monty, would work. For one, they had all already known Monty, had lived with him at Hogwarts. Mafalda was abandoned by her father as soon as she learned she was a witch. She wanted to go home.

He could tell what his mother was trying to do. She wanted to create a homey, welcoming atmosphere. To make Mafalda more comfortable with the presence of other children. To show they were a loving family, and she was part of that family even if they had just met her.

“Do you like horses?” his mother asked, setting Mafalda next to Ginny. Ginny gave her a weak smile. Mafalda stared at the table.

“Yes,” she said sullenly.

“Um, unicorns are real,” Ginny offered.

Mafalda was slow to respond. “Cool.”

“What else do you like?” Ron asked, up early for the first time in his life. Percy was proud. His siblings were annoying, true, and thoughtless, selfish, jealous, miscreants, but they were also kind. Even Ron could manage to not be a complete git to a heartbroken little girl.

“Video games,” Mafalda said. “But Richie won’t let me play his Sega.”

“Who’s Richie?” Fred asked, sharing a look with George.

Mafalda hesitated, then said, “My big brother. He goes to Eton.”

Percy’s mother cleared her throat. “Let’s introduce ourselves, shall we?”

Percy’s father took the day off work. It was poor timing all around, with the entire Ministry mobilized for the World Cup. But, as his father had reminded them all, family came first.

Percy could not afford to think that way. He was new to the Ministry, the stakes were high. What he did now set the tone for his entire career. If he lost his job, he didn’t know how he would survive. Mafalda would have to settle for six Weasleys instead of seven.

Errol had been sent to Aunt Muriel, the only other living Prewett they knew. Percy had lent Hermes to his parents, carrying a letter to the school. Mafalda wasn't the first witch to be rejected by her magicless parents, and she wouldn't be the last.

Before he left, Percy overheard Ginny making a noble effort to equate horses and brooms, while also having to explain that yes, witches really did fly on brooms.

His family could manage without him.

Percy walked through the garden, pausing when he saw the fresh tire tracks that cut through their property. No one had yet erased the evidence of Mafalda’s abandonment. He took out his wand, silently mending the crushed and muddy grass, burying the garden gnome that had been run over. He took one last look at the Burrow, then turned on the spot and vanished.

Harry walked through the Atrium, Lady Madeleine padding at his side. The Nimbus was far more comfortable than the Bluebottle, and after a day’s flying he didn’t feel like he had been caned by a hacked off Filch. He only needed to report to Mr. Montgomery, then he was free for the remainder of the day.

“Evans, do you have a moment?”

Harry was surprised to see Percy hurrying towards him, his navy blue robes flowing regally about him.

“I do,” Harry said. “Is something the matter?”

“There is something I wish to discuss,” Percy said, drawing up before him. “I shall accompany you.”

“Alright,” Harry said, bemused. As they walked to the lifts, he glanced surreptitiously at Percy. His stoic mien revealed little, but to Harry it seemed that Percy was worried about something.

It was early afternoon, one of the quieter times in the Ministry. The lull after lunch, before the end of the workday. The lift they caught was empty.

“What is it?” Harry asked as he pressed the button for Level Six. They began to rise.

“My family has a new member,” Percy said.

“Was your mum pregnant?”

Percy looked aghast. “No, Evans. A distant cousin has come to live with us.”

Harry pressed the emergency button, and the lift jerked to a stop.

He leaned against a wall and looked at Percy. Lady Madeleine sat on Harry’s foot. Percy’s brow pinched.

“That was wholly unnecessary,” Percy said. For a moment, Harry wondered if he had angered him. But that wasn’t it. Percy was *nervous*.

Harry cocked his head, his smile growing. “Explain from the beginning.”

Having it out in a stopped lift was not in the cards for Harry that day, nor any other lift-based activities. Percy had restarted the lift, Harry had made his report to Mr. Montgomery, and Percy had boldly grabbed Harry and apparated them somewhere.

“Are you allowed to leave work early?” Harry said breathlessly, looking around at where Percy had taken them. Percy was still holding his arm, but quickly released him to take in their surrounds.

“I forwent my lunch today,” Percy said faintly.

Harry looked at him, the pond they stood next to, then to the massive, precarious house some distance away.

Harry magnanimously ignored that Percy had brought him home, placing his own hand gently on Percy’s arm. Percy flinched, but didn’t move away.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked.

Percy nodded stiffly, and the story came out.

Mafalda Prewett, daughter of Percy's mother's second cousin Stephen Prewett, a squib stockbroker who had been exiled to the muggle world nearly thirty years prior, last seen at the wedding of Molly Prewett and Arthur Weasley.

"We're surprised he remembered how to get here," Percy said. They were seated now, after spells to ensure their privacy had been cast, watching iridescent pond skaters skim across the water.

Mafalda had been told to pack her most prized possessions: a Game Boy that couldn't work at the Burrow, a Polly Pocket pony, a book about mice who lived in an abbey, muggle clothes. She liked horses.

"She will stay here, of course," Percy said. He pulled his knees to his chest, wrapping his arms around them. Harry knew Percy was not accustomed to sitting on the ground. He recalled how long it took for Percy to become comfortable at the park. At the time, Harry had attributed it to not wanting to get his clothes dirty, his need to always be pristine and presentable. Now, Harry suspected Percy was nervous for other reasons.

"Why did you want to talk to me about it?" Harry asked.

Percy's eyes darted to him. "You have experience in transitioning from the muggle world to the magical world."

"Plenty of people do," Harry pointed out. "She's already halfway there. She's got you lot, she's got a pureblood surname."

Percy nodded, his lips thinning.

"I'd wager she'll have a bigger problem adjusting to being poor than to being magical," Harry said. "What a knob."

"Indeed," Percy said. "My family was intending to visit Diagon Alley this weekend. The plan has changed, to give my cousin time to adjust."

"Why?" Harry asked. "She was just kicked out of her house and given to another family. Can you imagine how suffocating that would be? I don't mean to imply anything about your family," he added, "but your parents aren't kicking anyone out. She might be jealous, or resentful. Diagon Alley would take her mind off things."

"You make a good point," Percy said. The setting sun sparkled off the water and cast Percy in golden light. It was mesmerizing. "Perhaps mother could take her, or Aunt Muriel, if she deigns to reply."

"I'm going this weekend," Harry said, watching Percy's reaction. "With Astrid's family."

The same day Astrid's Howler had screamed an invitation at him, Harry had got a letter from Monty. He knew Monty wanted to go to Diagon Alley with all of his friends, though it was impossible given Luna was dancing with fairy penguins, and Harry was...well, himself. Consorting with Slytherins? The Boy Who Lived would never.

Percy grew still, then pushed up his glasses. “Perhaps I could escort my cousin. I *have* taken Muggle Studies.”

Percy had lost his mind. Apparating Harry to the Burrow? He was too discombobulated, he needed one of those muggle whats-its. A planner.

Yes, that was the solution to all of his problems. He simply needed to be more organized.

He offered to apparate Harry anywhere he wanted, but Harry only smirked at him, pulling out a *Nimbus 2000* from his bag. Percy was impressed by the Department of Magical Transportation’s budget.

He watched Harry disillusion himself, absolutely entranced by how easily Harry had cast the spell, turning completely invisible as only the most powerful witches and wizards did. He was barely sixteen. He was a student.

Disappointed in himself, at his lack of self-control, at the desire that coiled hotly within him, Percy steeled himself and walked to the house. There was a matter he needed to discuss with his mother.

Monty neatly stepped out of the floo, tugging his shirt to get the ashes off. He hadn’t tripped, or fallen, or got off at the wrong grate. He ignored Sirius loudly praising the floo safety sign still posted in the Leaky Cauldron.

He looked around the pub. It was late morning, and there wasn’t much of a crowd. It was still dark and smoky, likely due to the old crone puffing vigorously on her pipe.

“Monty!”

He turned to see Neville waving at him, seated next to his gran. Did she only own the one hat? Stuffed vulture notwithstanding, Monty was glad to see Neville in a good mood. The visit to the botanic garden was another birthday gift for Neville, though they had gone on Monty’s birthday. Monty had never been to one either. His favorite part had been the butterfly house. He had never seen so many.

“I just saw Hermione and her parents,” Neville said, looking at the bar.

“Ron’s not coming,” Monty said, smiling as Hermione ran over. “Something about a cousin?”

Mrs. Longbottom made a loud, “Ha!” and shook her head. “Muriel has been in a *state*.”

Puzzled by this proclamation, Monty turned to Sirius, who shrugged.

“Monty!” Hermione exclaimed, throwing her arms around him. “How has your summer been? Have you seen the book list? I can’t believe you’re going to the World Cup! Have you heard from Ron?”

She froze when she saw Sirius.

“Nice to meet you,” Sirius said, smiling kindly.

Monty wished he had told her and Ron sooner. He knew how hard it was to go from seeing Sirius as the starved maniac in the *Daily Prophet* to a normal person. Well, not *normal*, but not an insane mass murderer.

“Nice to meet you,” Hermione said, collecting herself. She whispered to Monty, “How should I introduce him to my parents?”

The Drs. Granger had finished their conversation with Tom the barman and were walking over.

“Oh, you’re the muggleborn girl,” Mrs. Longbottom said. Neville looked mortified, but she kept on. “Neville’s told me all about you!”

“That’s...lovely,” Hermione said. “Mrs. Longbottom, and...Mr. Black? I’d like to introduce you to my parents...”

They made an odd group. Two muggle dentists, the venerated Augusta Longbottom, the wizard formerly known as Voldemort’s right hand man, Sirius Black. A muggleborn, the Boy Who Lived, and Neville. Monty tried to picture Hester flying above them, which made the scene only marginally more terrifying to the imagined passersby.

They walked towards Gringotts, where Hermione’s parents could exchange muggle money, something everyone else bar Monty was fascinated by. Monty kept checking on Sirius; they hadn’t gone into Diagon Alley together, as themselves. He was worried Sirius wouldn’t cope. The staring, the whispers, none of it was subtle.

Augusta Longbottom was thriving in it.

“She loves to gossip,” Neville confided to him while they were getting fitted for robes.

“My parents are used to it,” Hermione said, glancing at them. Monty was glad she hadn’t grown up like him, with people who were terrified of her magic. Her parents were proud of having a witch in the family, happy for their daughter. The Dursleys would never be happy for him.

He had Sirius. That was more than enough.

Diagon Alley was, as always, a marvel to behold. Hermione’s parents were endlessly amused by all the different people, witches, wizards, the denizens of Knockturn, goblins, house-elves, owls, kneazles. In all different shapes, sizes, colors, even more diverse now that people from

other countries were beginning to arrive for the Quidditch World Cup, taking the opportunity to tour magical Britain.

Monty felt bad that Ron couldn't come along too, and he wasn't sure how well Hermione and Neville would get on given Hermione thought Neville was an idiot, but it was fun. Sirius did have to stop him from purchasing a solid gold gobstones set, which Monty had only been half-serious about. He knew it wasn't fit for league play.

After their dress robes had been acquired, Mrs. Longbottom and Sirius sharing whatever was happening at Hogwarts with Hermione's parents, they sat down at Fortescue's for an ice cream break.

Monty had turned to Hermione and Neville to see what they wanted to do next when he heard a commotion from within the ice cream parlor.

"*Anaphylactic shock?*" an old woman croaked. "Don't speak gibberish at me, boy! I'm one hundred and four years old!"

It was a recipe for disaster.

His dad was the Potions Master. Harry knew some ingredients didn't mix. He'd seen the eldritch remains in the cauldrons.

He liked to keep his friend groups separated, totally ignorant of each other if possible. He had his Slytherin friends in his year. He had Luna. He had Monty. Sometimes Luna *and* Monty, if the stars aligned. He had his gobstones team. And he had Percy.

Harry suppressed a smile when he saw Mhairi bouncing down Diagon Alley, dragging Astrid with her, their parents following a short distance behind. She had sussed his pathetic crush on Percy ages ago, assigning him enemy status for his affiliation with the Gryffindor quidditch team and half of its members, depending on the year. What would she even talk to him about? Broomstick regulations?

Actually, she would.

Harry walked over to greet her family, surprised when Mhairi flung herself at him.

"You missed her birthday party this year," Astrid said, rolling her eyes. "Undine and Dùghlas can shed their skins now."

"Cool," Harry said, hugging Mhairi back. "I bet they're still better swimmers, even without their fins."

Mhairi pouted, but didn't deny it. After some small talk, she skipped away with her parents, leaving Astrid and Harry to their own devices.

“Did you see the dress robes?” Astrid asked as they walked, pulling her shopping list from her pocket. Harry noticed she was in muggle clothes, shorts and a tank top to show off her biceps. “Me, in dress robes? McGonagall’s off her rocker.”

“I’m not buying them,” Harry said. “It’s for the Yule Ball.”

Astrid grabbed his arm, and they stopped in the middle of the street. “What?”

“It’s the Triwizard Tournament this year,” Harry said. Astrid hadn’t let go, so he pulled her to the side of the street. “So they’re doing the Yule Ball too. It’s part of the whole thing.”

Astrid had a feral grin. “You’re entering, then?”

“Can’t,” Harry said. “They’re only letting students over seventeen enter.”

She looked appalled. “What a crock of shite.”

Harry shrugged, and started walking again. “That’s why I’m not wasting any money on dress robes. If I don’t get a shot at the cup, I’m not going to dance around for them.”

“Who’s *them*?” Astrid asked.

“The Department of International Magical Cooperation,” Harry said. Excluding one employee.

“Rolls right off the tongue,” Astrid said drolly.

“I’ve got to exchange my promissory note,” Harry said, switching subjects. He hadn’t told Astrid about Percy, though they hadn’t exactly hid their association at the Ministry. What was it doing to Percy’s reputation? Did he care?

“How was the training camp?” he asked, hoping Astrid didn’t notice anything off with him. Which there was. He expected to see Percy at some point, with his cousin Mafalda. Hermes had arrived that morning with an itinerary. Soon, Harry would wish he had committed it to memory.

When the shopping had been done, and Astrid’s family located, they all went to Fortescue’s for ice cream. Inside of the shop was cool, a relief given the muggy heat of the day. It smelled sweet, like strawberries and caramel. There wasn’t a line, most people opting to order at the tables outside.

Mhairi’s eyes lit up, and she ran to press herself against the glass display case behind which the ice creams were hidden.

“You can pick *one* flavor,” Astrid’s mother said. Mhairi wailed in protest, and one flavor was amended to two.

“What’re you getting, Haz?” Astrid asked, draping an arm over his shoulders. What the hell had they made her do in training? Lift boulders?

“Some sort of melon,” Harry said, considering his options. Fortescue’s did offer mystery flavors, and random combinations to help those who couldn’t make a choice faced with their immense inventory.

“Peabutt buttah,” Mhairi drooled, smooshing her face against the glass.

“I can’t have peanuts,” Harry said. The bell rang, announcing the arrival of more customers. “I’m allergic to them.”

“Percival! Read the menu for me!”

Harry froze, drawing a suspicious look from Astrid.

“Yes, Auntie Muriel.”

Astrid’s hold on him tightened. “Pop goes the weasel,” she whispered.

“What the *fuck* does that mean?” he whispered back.

“Mafalda, dear, they’ve got a menu over here. Do you like ice cream? Pick whatever you’d like.”

“The girl isn’t a suckling pig!”

“Mummy,” Mhairi said, having been removed from the glass. “Why can’t Harry have peanut butter?”

Her mother knelt down to explain, while Harry struggled to get out of Astrid’s grasp.

“Is that Harry Evans?”

“Oh, god,” Harry muttered. “Astrid, *let go*.”

Astrid did not go, instead, spinning them both around to face Percy, his mother, his great-aunt, and his cousin.

Mrs. Weasley had left off coddling the girl, Mafalda, who looked torn between ripping the menu apart and eagerly reading it, to smile at Harry.

“It’s so good to see you!” she said. She gave Astrid a curious look. “Is this a friend of yours?”

Harry didn’t dare look at Percy while he was subjected to Astrid’s humiliating hold. He was forced to introduce her family.

“Harry’s a prefect,” Mrs. Weasley said to Great-Aunt Muriel, who had been busy glaring and sniffing at everything in turns. “He’s done a lot for our family.”

Great-Aunt Muriel turned her gimlet eye on him. “Evans?”

“Peanuts! Peanuts!” Mhairi chanted.

“Harry can’t have them!” Astrid snapped.

“Oh, yes, Percy’s told me,” Mrs. Weasley gushed. “Did you like the hazelnut brittle I sent?”

“Percival?” Great-Aunt Muriel said, swinging around to look at her nephew. Her eyes darted between him and Harry, adopting an unsettling light.

Percy was unnaturally still, his expression blank. Harry stared at him. Was Percy—

“If I eat peanuts, I go into anaphylactic shock,” Harry said quickly. He had heard about Muriel Prewett. The woman was terrifying.

After the traumatizing excuse for small talk was over, Harry studiously avoided Astrid’s gaze and took his cantaloupe ice cream outside.

“It’s Snape junior!” Sirius Black announced joyously.

Harry sighed. He was glad the man was doing better, but did he have to look so chuffed about his lame joke?

Monty was with him, smiling apologetically for his godfather’s behavior. There was Hermione Granger, her parents, Neville Longbottom, and the famously nosy Augusta Longbottom, who had fixed Harry with a piercing gaze in the same manner her good friend Muriel Prewett did.

Harry realized, with dawning horror, that they were both old enough to have known the Prince family.

Behind him, Astrid cackled.

Invitations

Chapter Summary

August 1994

Chapter Notes

I got my test score as I was writing this chapter. The qualifying score is 159 (yikes). For those who have been curious as to how I did, I got 194. Yay.

Percy's cup of black sesame ice cream sat before him, untouched. Every time his family came to Diagon Alley, his mother made sure to set aside a few coins for Fortescue's. It was one of the rare treats their family could afford, and everyone looked forward to it. Everyone, except Percy.

He had never been allowed to enjoy ice cream, as it always came with an additional cost. His siblings took the abundance of food at the Burrow for granted. They were poor, but not poor enough to starve. They had magic, unlike the homeless muggles he had seen throughout London. People who had no shelter, who were forced to live their lives in public, who begged for change, who drank just so they could make it through the day. People who couldn't wash their clothes or their bodies. They didn't have spells to do it for them. The Weasleys were poor, true, but they had never experienced muggle poverty.

And so he was ashamed of himself, ashamed he could not let himself enjoy a scoop of magical ice cream, charmed to never melt, a thousand flavors for a sickle.

It was easier to think about the ethical consumption of magical ice cream than the catastrophe his life had become.

He had heard Sirius Black's joke about Harry's resemblance to Professor Snape, which was superficial at best. Harry was a Slytherin, true, dark of hair and eyes, but so were others in Slytherin. In terms of personality, they were nothing alike. Unlike others in his house who valued blood purity, Harry had been sorted for his brilliance, his determination, his resolve. No one who lacked ambition would be at the top of his class, year after year, straight Os on his O.W.L.s. Percy had never felt so alive as when he watched Harry cast spells. His being muggleborn was irrelevant. Harry lived and breathed magic.

And thus, it was with no small amount of satisfaction that Percy watched Sirius Black's face drop when the Weasleys and Prewetts stepped outside with their ice cream.

Sirius Black, and Monty Potter, were the perfect distractions for Great-Aunt Muriel. She already knew his secret. He had to shield Harry from her machinations.

Harry, who had a sticky, sleeping six-year-old girl sprawled on his lap. It was absolutely adorable.

Percy shied away from the dangerous thought. Harry was a fellow prefect, and a colleague. That was all.

Harry was sitting next to his close friend Astrid Urquhart. Urquhart, who had been staring daggers at him while nudging Harry. The girl looked like she could rip him in half. What did she know?

On Harry's other side was Mafalda, who hunched over her ice cream protectively.

What flavor had Harry got? Cantaloupe? Percy wished he had ordered it too.

“So,” Aunt Muriel said, startling Percy. He hadn't been paying attention. He'd been staring at Harry, like a complete idiot. “This is Monty Potter?”

“Monty's a bit of a celebrity in our world,” his mother explained to Mafalda. “He defeated a very bad wizard when he was a baby.”

To Percy's shock, Harry rolled his eyes at this. Apparently he hadn't escaped his house's disdain for the Boy Who Lived. It was...disappointing.

Harry caught his eye and gave him a sheepish look before refocusing on the conversation. Which Percy ought to have been doing, rather than fantasizing he had been sat next to Harry.

“Will you be joining the Wizengamot this session, Mr. Black?” Hermione asked.

Percy's mother whispered to Mafalda an explanation, while Percy internally winced. Having been in the same house as Hermione for three years, he knew she was naturally intelligent, and had a work ethic that rivaled his own, but she was fourteen and had yet to learn discretion.

Black's expression darkened, and the adults gave each other nervous looks. Hermione's innocent curiosity shifted to worry.

Harry was the one to break the silence. “The Black family's hereditary seat was ceded upon Arcturus Black's death. They held a by-election last spring and the seat was filled.”

“Oh,” Hermione said quietly. “I'm sorry, I didn't know.”

Black sighed. “I've contested the validity of the election, given my innocence, but it would require an amendment to the current law, which needs a supermajority in the Wizengamot to pass.”

Monty's eyes widened in some private understanding, but he held his tongue.

“The same happened to the Potters,” Mrs. Longbottom said. “A four hundred year legacy, gone like *that*,” she said with a snap of her fingers. “Without so much as a by-your-leave!”

Monty seemed too stunned by this information to be offended by his parents’ murdered being represented by a snapped finger. “My family was in the Wizengamot?”

This time it was Aunt Muriel who spoke. “Your great-grandfather, Henry, was famously pro-muggle. He was one of the few who wanted to help the muggles during their war. Henry always said it would come back to bite us in the arse, and it did! Grindelwald!”

“You knew him?” Monty asked. “My great-grandfather?”

“Knew him?” Aunt Muriel said. “We were neighbors!”

The ice cream was gradually consumed. The Drs. Granger, dentists—teeth healers, as explained to the others—left to beat the traffic and brush their teeth, taking Hermione with them. The Urquharts’ youngest daughter was in clear need of a nap, so they too took their leave. The eldest whispered something to Harry that made his cheeks pink.

“Want to go to Quality Quidditch Supplies?” Monty asked Neville. “I need new gloves.”

“Good idea, kid,” Black said, standing. “We could get you some self-adjusting ones.”

“I’ll go,” Neville said eagerly, before looking at his grandmother. “If that’s okay?”

Mrs. Longbottom scoffed. “Your father was begging me for quidditch gloves at your age! Come along Neville.”

For the first time all day, Mafalda spoke. “I want to go too.”

Percy’s mother immediately agreed, and soon it was just him, Harry, Aunt Muriel, and his uneaten ice cream.

“Can I have that?” Harry asked, taking the cup without waiting for a response. “Cheers.”

Aunt Muriel grinned. It was distressing to witness.

“Harry Evans, was it?” Aunt Muriel asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry said.

“You’re in Slytherin?” she asked.

“What gave it away?” Harry said, smirking at her.

“*Snape junior*,” Aunt Muriel said.

“It’s a running joke,” Harry said. “Even this one called me Professor Snape’s favorite the first time we met. Outside of school, that is.”

“Is that so, Percival?” Aunt Muriel asked him.

“I was ill at the time,” Percy said. “But yes, Harry is considered a favorite among all of the professors. He has been at the top of his class every year, has saved the school on several occasions, and is a prefect.”

“Saved the best for last, eh?” Harry said, raising an eyebrow.

“My priorities are in order,” Percy said.

Aunt Muriel laughed. It was more of a cackle, given her advanced age. A family at a nearby table cringed away.

“You’re a clever one, aren’t you?” Aunt Muriel said. “Evans. That name sounds familiar.”

“It’s a common muggle surname,” Harry said dismissively.

Aunt Muriel narrowed her eyes. “Who are your parents?”

“My mother passed away about seven years ago,” Harry said.

“Where did you grow up?”

“Midlands, just outside of Birmingham.”

“How old are you?”

“I recently turned sixteen.”

“You’re too short for your age.”

Harry paused, then said, “You’re too old to be alive.”

Aunt Muriel nodded, a pleased look on her face. Percy was dumbfounded.

“What have you got up to this summer?” Aunt Muriel asked.

“I’m an intern with the Ministry. Department of Magical Transportation.”

Aunt Muriel looked at Percy. “Interesting. *Very* interesting.”

“It is,” Harry agreed. “It’s been mad with the World Cup going on. They wanted me for the Gobstones Club at first.”

Her gaze snapped back to Harry. “Fond of gobstones, are you?”

“I’m the captain of the house team. We’ve won four consecutive years.”

Aunt Muriel had a look of someone storing this information for later. For what, Percy had no idea. Nothing good, he was certain.

“What is your opinion on the wand ordinance the Wizengamot passed during the spring session?” she asked.

Percy held his breath as Harry ate a spoonful of ice cream. He swallowed, then asked, “Which one?”

Aunt Muriel struck the ground with her cane. “Impudent child, the restriction on resale!”

“I think it’s bollocks,” Harry baldly stated.

Percy sighed in relief.

“It’s another way for the Ministry to control the goblins’ commerce,” Harry continued. “I think we all know it’s fall out from the Chipping Clodbury *riot*. When it came out the goblins had purchased old wands in Knockturn, the writing was on the wall.”

“It’s not only goblins it impacts,” Percy interjected. “What about anyone who can’t afford a wand? Ron was using Charlie’s old one up until last year. What if someone doesn’t have older relatives to pass down wands? How else are they meant to acquire one?”

“You said it perfectly, Perce,” Harry said, smiling at him. “*First they came for the communists*, and all that.”

“What’s a communist?” Aunt Muriel asked. “Some muggle thing?”

“I can explain,” Percy said, eager to share his knowledge of muggle history. Harry propped his head in one hand, waiting for him to begin.

“I feel like I’ve run a gauntlet,” Harry muttered, glad the others had returned. Monty was having an animated conversation with Neville, and Percy’s cousin Mafalda was listening in with an eerie expression. Harry hoped the girl was more interested in magic than her shitty family, at least for the moment. He’d eaten all of Percy’s ice cream. He would have to make it up to him.

The mandrake leaf had a tendency to trap food. He would be tasting black sesame all day.

“She is...intense,” Percy decided, smiling at his mother, who was chatting with Sirius Black and Augusta Longbottom. Strange bedfellows.

Harry was disappointed he hadn’t been able to spend time with his brother, but happy to see Monty happy. Their group drew a considerable amount of attention, given the average age and number of *Daily Prophet* headlines they boasted. Monty didn’t seem to care, laughing with his friends as they explored Diagon Alley, having his godfather, an adult who, if not one Harry fully trusted, had Monty’s best interests at heart.

Mrs. Longbottom was complaining about her knees and went home, taking Neville with her in a *crack*. Seeing Monty's amazement at this, Black apparated him on the spot. Harry wasn't able to say goodbye. He'd seen Black's smirk. Was he being tested?

"Oh, Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "We would love to have you round for dinner."

"It would be my honor," Harry said honestly. Mrs. Prewett gave him a knowing look. Being a natural occlumens, in total control of his emotions at all times, Harry ignored her.

"Percival's birthday is soon," Mrs. Prewett said. She sounded like she had smoked every day of her one hundred and four years of life.

"I was going to say, it's a shame Ginny's has already passed," Mrs. Weasley said. "She would have loved to have you!"

Harry never wanted to hear those words again in his life. "That's very kind of you."

"Mother is planning a dinner to acknowledge the day I was born," Percy said.

"A birthday dinner," Harry said, amused.

"You are welcome to attend," Percy continued.

Harry could feel Mrs. Prewett's eyes boring a hole into his skull. "Thank you. Consider this my RSVP."

Mrs. Weasley clapped her hands together. "You're invited too, Auntie Muriel."

"Remembered I'm alive, have you?" Mrs. Prewett said. "If you want me at the Burrow, you'll have to drag my dead body there."

Mrs. Weasley gasped, covering Mafalda's ears with her hands. Mafalda, for her part, looked absolutely delighted. "Auntie!"

Mrs. Prewett waved one ancient hand at her niece. "You may visit me in Godric's Hollow any time you please, Molly."

Mrs. Prewett heaved herself upright, gripping her cane for support. "Angerona is expecting me for a game of chess," she said. "Percival, you will accompany me home."

"Yes, Auntie Muriel," Percy said, hastening to her side. Mrs. Prewett seized him and, with impressive agility, apparated away.

"Well," Mrs. Weasley said, displeasure marring her kind face. "I suppose after a certain age social niceties no longer matter! Don't mind her, dear, Auntie Muriel is an acquired taste."

Realizing he was being spoken to, Harry smiled and said, "I like her."

The ease with which Aunt Muriel captured him was humiliating. Once again, he was immobilized on her fainting couch in her drawing room, Aunt Muriel lurking nearby. Percy closed his eyes, hoping that when he opened them he would be somewhere, anywhere else.

Percy opened his eyes. Aunt Muriel was frighteningly close, sniffing him.

“Hmm,” she said. She jabbed him with her cane, unsticking him, and hobbled to a chair. She sat down, shaking her head. “A muggleborn, eh?”

Percy pushed himself upright. “Evans?”

Aunt Muriel bristled. “Who else, you foolish boy? And an orphan too.”

Percy was growing annoyed. “I cannot fathom what either has to do with anything.”

“You can’t?” Aunt Muriel said, leaning forward with a fierce expression. “Then explain to me why you love potioned yourself to the gills in order to tolerate the mere *presence* of that boy’s polar opposite!”

“I—”

She stabbed the floor with her cane. “You should be ashamed of yourself, Percival!”

“I am!” he snapped. He was so tired. “Is that not readily apparent? Do you think I...” Percy put his head in his hands, breathing heavily. He wanted to leave. He had work in the morning. Harry was back in Diagon with his mother and cousin. A nightmare. He was having a nightmare.

“You need someone who can keep up with you,” Aunt Muriel continued. “That boy...are you certain he’s muggleborn?”

“Yes,” Percy said acidly. “He was petrified by the basilisk.”

Aunt Muriel’s mouth hung open. “Basilisk?”

The whole story came out. Ginny and the diary. The possession. Cats and muggleborns petrified. Harry putting the pieces together, so stupidly courageous when he looked into that mirror, wanting proof of his theory.

“That’s why mum said he’s done a lot for our family,” Percy finished. “After he was petrified, the whole castle was searched. Professor McGonagall found the diary in Ginny’s things.”

“There’s more,” Aunt Muriel said, too keen for Percy’s comfort. “How has this boy got you so wrapped around his fingers?”

Percy blushed, but couldn’t deny it. And he *wanted* to talk about Harry. Who else would listen?

So he explained it. The troll that broke into the castle. The discovery of Peter Pettigrew, his double life as Scabbers. Harry's mastery of the patronus. The long hours he spent in the heart of the Restricted Section. The defense of Buckbeak.

But it had started long before that. When a boy once told him he didn't have to drink the butterbeer.

When he was finished, Aunt Muriel reclined in her chair, fingers laced in contemplation. Percy ran a frustrated hand through his hair. He was having second thoughts. What was the point in all of this?

"I'm too old to be meddling in the love lives of teenagers," she said, shaking her head.

"You seemed happy enough to invite him to my birthday," Percy said. Fred and George would never let him live it down.

"As did you," Aunt Muriel said cattily.

Percy sighed, then stood to leave. "Is there anything else, or may I go home? I *do* have a job, as you might recall. Don't you have a chess game to attend?"

"*There's* that spine," she said. "And no. Angerona is asleep on the Knight Bus around this time."

"Fascinating," Percy said, walking towards the door.

"I like him," she called out.

Percy turned back to her, frowning at her smug expression. "You are laboring under the misapprehension that your opinion matters. Have a good evening, Auntie Muriel."

Albus Dumbledore had returned to his kingdom. Severus had been enjoying the headmaster's absence; staff meetings were much more entertaining when they were allowed to rail against his eccentricities. For example, agreeing to host the Triwizard Tournament. Charity had already created a list of students, complete with odds. Severus was not pleased to see a certain moronic Hufflepuff was 3 to 1.

"It's good to see you all again," Dumbledore said, smiling warmly at his minions.

McGonagall was visibly relieved; without the responsibility of the headmaster's duties, in addition to her own, she was free to revel in the upcoming Quidditch World Cup.

"How is the First Task coming along?" Dumbledore asked.

Hagrid was vibrating with excitement. Severus lifted his cup from the table.

“We’ve heard back from the sanctuary in Romania,” Hagrid said, his voice thick with emotion.

“Splendid,” the headmaster said. “Now, there is a matter we must discuss. I must ask you all to remain calm.”

“What is it, Albus?” McGonagall asked.

“Given we will be hosting two schools,” Dumbledore said, “in addition to our preparations for the Tournament, I am afraid we must cancel quidditch this year.”

There was a beat of silence, just long enough for the outrage to truly set in.

“You’ve finally lost your mind, headmaster,” Severus said, the first to speak. “For good this time. The children will riot.”

“Blast the children,” McGonagall said heatedly. “You can’t cancel quidditch!”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “I can’t?”

“No!” she exclaimed. “Severus is right, Albus. You’ve lost your mind! There are only three tasks, in which *one* Hogwarts student will compete! There is no need to cancel quidditch over that.”

Dumbledore laced his fingers together, smiling blandly at McGonagall as she seethed.

“Are you having us on?” Charity asked. “We can barely keep the students in their seats. If you take quidditch away...Severus is right. Merlin, what would the Weasley twins do to us?”

Sprout made an inarticulate noise. Thinking of her precious plants, the fate that lay in store for them should Fred and George Weasley not be sufficiently entertained.

“What about the other extracurricular activities?” Flitwick asked. “Charms Club? Frog Choir?”

“Gobstones,” Sprout added, Charity nodding vigorously.

“Art Club?” Vector asked.

“Will you be canceling Astronomy?” Sinistra asked, picking her nails.

Severus shook his head. They were getting off topic. “Quidditch must not, under any circumstances, be canceled. If you do so, headmaster, I hereby vow to turn the Great Hall into an indoor quidditch pitch.”

“Hear hear!” Flitwick cried.

“I didn’t know you cared for quidditch, Severus,” Dumbledore said mildly.

“That is beside the point,” Severus said. “We cannot focus on whoever the Triwizard champion is to the exclusion of the other students! It is inequitable!”

Severus, not realizing he had stood, sat back down. He turned to look at Charity, who had stars in her eyes. Ignoring this, he turned back to the headmaster.

“There are students whose future careers rely on their playing quidditch while at Hogwarts,” McGonagall said. “Albus, you are suggesting we hobble them! You may as well break their brooms right now!”

“That is rather extreme, Minerva,” Dumbledore said. “Still, I will take your concerns into consideration. For now, please do not make any permanent alterations to the castle without consulting me. I assure you, the quidditch pitch will be restored to its original state.”

McGonagall shot up. “*Restored?*” she shouted. “What have you done!” She ran out of the room, leaving them in stunned silence.

“Nothing,” the headmaster said. “Yet.”

The meeting came to a swift end, leaving only the headmaster in high spirits.

“Would you like to come round to watch a film?” Charity asked him. “I’ve got *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* on VHS.”

“There are potions I must attend to,” Severus said. Harry had been in an unusual mood, and Severus was concerned. The boy was up to something.

“What are you on about, Severus?” Pomfrey said, pausing on her way out of the room. “The infirmary is fully stocked!”

Charity gave him a knowing look. “Well?”

“Experimental potions,” he said, rising from his seat. “It is a genuine prior commitment. I will, however, be free tomorrow evening.”

“It’s a date,” Charity said happily. She flounced from the room, leaving Severus standing there like the fool he was.

“About time,” Pomfrey, busybody and witness to yet another indignity, said.

Severus fled the castle. It was true he was utterly indifferent to quidditch, but there was a caveat. Harry, whose best friend was the captain of the team. Urquhart would be devastated, and Harry would be livid on her behalf.

He flooded home, emerging to a suspiciously quiet living room. Lady Madeleine was sitting by the basement door, and began scratching at it when she noticed him.

“Did he forget what day it is?” Severus asked, opening the door. The grey cat darted down the stairs. “Furthermore, did I not explicitly state he was *not* to use that room for the remainder of holiday?”

Severus hurried down the stairs, hoping his son hadn’t done anything monumentally stupid. Teenager. He had to remember that Harry was a *teenager*.

Lady Madeleine was now scratching at the door to Harry’s workroom, meowing plaintively. It sounded like someone was crying inside. Severus picked the cat up and ripped the door open.

Harry was in the center of the room, laughing as he held a kettle aloft.

Severus stared at him in disbelief. Lady Madeleine thrashed a bit and he let her jump down.

Harry stopped laughing when he noticed them. “Hey, dad.”

Severus decided he did not wish to know why his son was laughing over an electric kettle. “It is the full moon.”

Harry’s eyes widened and he gently set the kettle down. “Finally. I can’t wait to spit this thing out. I’ll get the moon rays!”

He watched his son hurry through the door at the opposite end of the room, into the garden where they had set out phials to collect moon rays. Lady Madeleine ran after him, slinking through the door just before it closed.

Severus looked around the room, then at the deceptively innocuous kettle, then left.

He had a *very* strange child.

Voracious Appetites

Chapter Summary

August 1994

Chapter Notes

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Harry was at the kitchen table, paging through *Legal Guidelines for the Manufacture of Magical Apparatus*, a look of intense concentration on his face. His eyes lit up when he found it. *Possession of Muggle Artifacts With No Intention of Redistribution or Resale Regulations (Amendment) 1992*. He smiled to himself, writing something down in his notebook.

Resale right in a muggle artifact shall continue to subsist so long as... Reg. 26 in force 17.3.1824 in accordance with...

“Good morning,” his dad said, striding into the room. “Have you said your incantation?”

“Morning,” Harry said, smiling up at him. “Yeah, I did. I don’t want to do the mandrake leaf again.”

His dad nodded, walking to the counter to retrieve coffee. He paused, eyeing the cafetière. He looked at Harry, then scrutinized the legal tome.

“I feel obligated to ask,” his dad said, walking closer. Harry looked up at him. “Are you creating portkeys?”

Harry scanned the kitchen, wondering which item he could sacrifice. He spotted an old copy of the *Daily Prophet* and summoned it over.

“Why would you think that?” he asked innocently, adjusting the paper so it sat in the middle of the table.

His dad frowned. "It is not an unreasonable assumption to make, given your present line of work, the law book you are consulting, and your...unusual reaction to an electric kettle."

"Can you make portkeys?" Harry asked, carefully aiming his wand at the paper.

"I cannot," his dad admitted. "I never saw the utility in such a spell. Harry, I must tell you to *not* cast that—"

"*Portus!*" Harry happily incanted. The spell stuck the paper dead center. He watched in fascination as it shuddered, the paper glowing with violent blue light, and then it began to disintegrate.

"It's not that simple," Harry said, putting his wand away. The old *Daily Prophet* continued to, not exactly vanish, but cease to exist at any contiguous points. "Portkeys are incredibly difficult to make. I'm still not sure what type of spell it is, if it can even be classed as a charm, for example, or if it falls under time magic, which is its own beast. *Technically*, it changes the nature of an object in that it no longer exists in one location, but two. In that context, *charm* is as good a name as any. Not every spell can be easily categorized, as you know."

His dad pinched the bridge of his nose. "Harry, I had *just* said to not do that."

Harry grimaced. "Sorry. But it's demonstrative of the point I'm trying to make. That thing is extremely volatile, which—"

"Which is *why* I said to not cast the spell!" his dad snapped, opening his eyes to glare at him. "I dare not vanish it for fear it will take us all with it!"

Harry bowed his head, biting his lip. "It'll disappear in a moment. I've tried it before, you know. In a controlled environment."

"A controlled environment," his dad echoed. "Which our kitchen is *not*."

They were silent as the *Daily Prophet* continued destroying itself. It didn't take long, and it had no effect on anything else. Harry hadn't worked out the contact bit of the spell.

"I haven't even got to single versus multi-use, or timed portkeys," he said mulishly.

His dad sighed, then sat down at the table. "You never got to be a child, did you?"

Harry looked up. "What?"

His dad stared at the center of the table, then shook his head. "Ignore me. Just...please do not attempt spells you have yet to master in the kitchen."

"Okay," Harry said, setting his book back on the table. "Sorry. I made breakfast?"

His dad smiled faintly, and Harry stood to serve.

After they had eaten, as Harry cleared the dishes, his dad said, “This does beg the question, what *were* you doing?”

Harry spelled the dishes to wash themselves, taking a moment to fight down his blush.

“Nothing,” Harry said smoothly. “I just really like kettles.”

After a moment, he heard his dad’s chair move. “Very well. I shall be in the lab today. Also, I will be returning late this evening.”

Harry turned away from the sink to look at him. “Is there another staff meeting?”

“No,” his dad said, examining the table for any lasting portkey damage. “I am meeting with an acquaintance.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. This was an aberration. His dad? Acquaintances? The idea that his dad had a life outside of teaching, potion making, and, well, being his dad, was revelatory. Was it even allowed?

“Who?” Harry asked.

His dad gave him a wry look. “The bane of my existence.”

“That doesn’t exactly narrow it down,” Harry protested, but his dad was already sweeping out of the room.

Percy hurried for the lifts, carrying a box that alleged to be a sample of fertilizer from Norway. That a raw material had been deposited in his inbox, rather than paperwork regarding that material, made its authenticity questionable.

He was being too generous. He knew Fred and George had sent the dragon dung. He hoped that, if they knew dragon fecal matter was a vector for dragon pox, they would not have sent it to someone with a compromised immune system.

“Ah, Weatherby! Just in time.”

Percy felt the sting of disappointment, but didn’t let it show. He had been passing Mr. Jordan’s office, politely ignoring the open door, hoping he wouldn’t be noticed given his freight.

“Good morning, Mr. Crouch, Mr. Jordan. How may I, Percy Weasley, be of service?”

Mr. Jordan gave him an amused look. “Barty and I were just discussing which projects to prioritize, now that preparations for the World Cup are wrapping up.”

Percy nodded, awkwardly holding his box of shit while conversing with his bosses.

“I’ve been going through the backlog you sorted,” Mr. Jordan said, shuffling papers. “You prioritized them?”

“Yes, Mr. Jordan,” Percy said. “In order of what I considered most critical. I apologize for using my own criteria, I would be happy to—”

“It’s fine, Weasley,” Mr. Jordan said, emphasizing his name. He took the top folder from the stack and held it out for Percy to take. Percy rearranged the box of shit under his arm.

“You’ve done very well.”

Mr. Crouch nodded. “There are exciting things happening in the department, Weath...ah, Weasley. Exciting things. But we must not let our standards slip! Now, this has been a bit of a pet project of mine...”

Percy slowed his breathing, a technique learned from the occlumency book he’d read back to front too many times to count, to try to be less aware of the fact that, while he was being presented with an opportunity to prove himself as more than someone who was punctual and organized, he was also holding damning evidence of how ridiculous his family was.

He returned to his desk in a tizzy. He still had to file a biohazard report, deliver the dragon dung for testing, have a chat with the Owl Post Room about taking, at the very least, rudimentary precautions. But this was big. Huge.

Mr. Crouch, *the* Mr. Crouch, wanted him to create a report and draft a regulatory standard for cauldron thickness. He had even connected the name *Weasley* to him. With prompting, but nevertheless an improvement.

Percy sat down at his desk, writing a curt note to the Owl Post Room and tagging the box of dung. Feeling petty, he attached the dragon dung to one of the lilac paper airplanes and set it loose in the interdepartmental system.

He made sure the dung was secure. He wasn’t *reckless*.

As he walked to his lunch meeting with Harry, an event he now memorialized in the daily planner he kept on his person at all times, Percy was accosted by a balding, middle-aged, bespectacled man.

It was his father.

“Percy, thank the stars,” his father said, smiling warmly at him. He looked exhausted, which was what he had looked like for as long as Percy could remember. He had tried his best to establish some order in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, but a summer internship was

not a sufficient amount of time for such a daunting task. Percy was unwavering in his belief that his father's job would be much easier if they requisitioned a filing cabinet.

"What is the matter?" Percy asked. He pulled out his pocket watch, a little concerned he had missed his meeting with Harry and had stayed past contract hours. His father only visited the Department of International Magical Cooperation to pressure him to go home.

"It's a sensitive issue," his dad said in a low tone, placing a hand on Percy's back to propel him down the hall. "Perkins is inspecting tents at the stadium, otherwise I'd ask him. You should have seen what the Lovegoods put up."

Percy let himself be maneuvered into a lift and didn't respond to the Lovegood comment. Harry was friends with Luna Lovegood, and Percy was not amenable to any disparaging comments about her or her father.

He closed his eyes in frustration. Aunt Muriel was right. Did Harry know how much his opinion mattered?

His father pressed the button for the Atrium, and they began their descent.

"I have a lunch meeting," Percy said, already feeling around his robes to write a memo to send to Harry. He would follow along with whatever mad scheme his father had. His mother had always wanted him and his siblings to follow their father into the Ministry. Percy was the only one who had.

"And I need to begin my report for Mr. Crouch," he added.

"It'll only be a mo," his father said, patting Percy's back. "The report just came in. We'll pop down to Dorset, do a bit of damage control, and be back in time for supper."

"Supper?" Percy said. He was beginning to feel rather cross. What, in his father's mind, was *a bit of damage control*? "Father, I've received a major assignment from Mr. Crouch. I have a meeting!"

"What's this assignment?" his father asked, herding him out of the lift. Percy managed to release the paper plane he held, and it flew back inside the lift.

"To create a set of standards for cauldron imports," Percy said. "That was the initial matter, but I believe it ought to be generalized to include domestic cauldron manufacturing. I've spent all morning drafting the research plan."

"Sounds important," his father said as they hurried through the Atrium. It was crowded with Ministry employees on their lunch breaks. "Is that what your meeting is about? If it's urgent..."

"No," Percy admitted. "The meeting is with another employee, not in an official capacity."

"A lunch date?" his father said, smiling at him.

Percy missed a step.

“It’s good you’re making friends here,” his father said, leading him to the bank of fireplaces. People came and went in vibrant bursts of green. What would a muggle think of it? Percy imagined they would be upset at seeing so many people apparently self-immolate.

“Friends, yes,” Percy said. “Father, where *are* we going?”

“Wimbourne,” his father said. He stopped them in front of a fireplace, then leaned close to say, “Otto Bagman’s house.”

Harry read the note Percy had sent him. There were only two reasons he came to the Ministry, to pick up more portkeys and to see Percy. They’d already finished with the current wave of World Cup attendees, so he’d only bother to come in for the latter.

Not a bad deal, for five galleons a week.

Harry, it said, revealing how rushed Percy had been.

Dad needs my help.

Harry marveled at the word *dad*. He hadn’t known it was in Percy’s vocabulary.

Can’t make lunch, perhaps—

The note ended before Percy could finish his thoughts. Perhaps *what?*

He folded the note into a boat so it wouldn’t fly off anywhere, then pushed it along his desk. While he did want to see Percy, Harry didn’t want to wait around the Ministry for hours on the off chance he would return.

Harry stood, slung his bag over his shoulder, and walked out of the Portkey Office. He waited for the lift, got on the one that arrived, and it sank towards the Atrium.

The lift stopped at Level Seven to admit more passengers, including an annoyed Captain Lament.

“Evans!” she barked, startling the other passengers. She placed her hand on the grille, not letting it close. “You’re just the man I need. Someone who can handle a pair of stones. Come

on!”

“Excuse her,” Harry said, pushing past hungry and disgruntled employees. “She works in the Official Gobstones Club.” Once he was free of the lift, he asked, “You weren’t getting on?”

“Change of plan,” Captain Lament said, releasing the lift’s door. It clattered shut and continued down, the other passengers sinking out of sight. Captain Lament seized his arm and marched Harry down the hallway.

Harry rarely had the occasion to visit the Department of Magical Games and Sports. He knew Captain Lament had tried, in vain, to increase gobstones visibility, a guerilla war against the profusion of quidditch propaganda that covered the walls of the department. There were posters, pennants, and framed portraits signed by famous players. "Dangerous" Dai Llewellyn of the Caerphilly Catapults, swandiving from his broom to catch the quaffle. Gwenog Jones, beater for the Holyhead Harpies, her broken nose fountaining blood.

There was a lot of activity, even during lunch, with the Quidditch World Cup only a week away. They passed the department head’s office. Ludo Bagman was inside, laughing boisterously with a plump witch.

“Lament, is that you?” Mr. Bagman called out. Captain Lament grumbled, but she stopped walking.

Harry had only seen Mr. Bagman in passing. He knew who he was, of course, outside of his role as department head. He had been a beater for the Wimbourne Wasps, and had never let anyone forget that. He was an older man, blond-haired and blue-eyed, with the same milkfed look Cedric had. The comparison did Mr. Bagman no favors.

“Bertha’s just come back from Albania,” Mr. Bagman said in his garrulous voice.

The witch turned to smile at them. She was middle-aged, older than Harry’s dad, and had a vacant look about her. Ditzzy. She had something of a reputation for being simultaneously forgetful and an inveterate gossip.

“Bertha, Lament’s the one who’s been on top of refreshments for the teams,” Mr. Bagman said. “She’s done a smashing job!”

“Lament?” Miss Jorkins asked, blinking at them.

“Charity Lament,” Mr. Bagman said, nodding encouragingly.

“Thank you, Mr. Bagman,” Captain Lament said through gritted teeth.

Something like awareness flickered in Miss Jorkin’s eyes. “That was meant to be my job?”

“Yes, Bertha,” Mr. Bagman said. “But all’s well that ends well. How is your aunt doing?”

Miss Jorkin’s face fell. “She...didn’t make it, Ludo. I had to stay to arrange her funeral.”

Mr. Bagman winced. “My condolences.” He cleared his throat, then looked back to Captain Lament. “Who’s that with you, Lament?”

“It’s Evans, sir,” Captain Lament said. “I wanted to consult with him regarding a certain *gobstones* matter. A second pair of eyes.”

Mr. Bagman’s eyes had glazed over at the mention of gobstones. “Carry on.”

“It was nice meeting you,” Harry said, not wanting to be rude to a department head. He smiled at Miss Jorkins, who gave him a blank look in return. Captain Lament, at the end of her patience, hauled him off.

“What gobstones matter?” Harry asked as he was marched down the hall.

“There’s been talk about adjusting the payload of bottle-washers,” Captain Lament said darkly. “Decreasing it by half a milliliter.”

“Charity,” Harry said, “you cannot be serious.”

“As a heart attack.” She whipped her head in anger, her ponytail smacking someone from the Ludicrous Patents Office in the face.

Harry closed his eyes in frustration. “*Decreasing*? What simpleton proposed that? This cannot be condoned.”

“The world’s gone mad,” Captain Lament spat.

Harry was inclined to agree.

It had taken hours to track down the lawnmower. Otto Bagman, Ludo Bagman’s brother, had enchanted the lawnmower to autonomously mow his lawn. A fairly standard thing to do to a muggle artifact, get it to work on its own so that the witch or wizard didn’t have to work out how to use it.

The mistake these erstwhile enchanters made was, in order to get the object to operate itself, one needed to understand how it was meant to function. They were stuck with not wanting to struggle with muggle technology, but it was that very knowledge they needed for their magic to work.

Percy watched his father and Otto Bagman chase the lawnmower through a field. Otto Bagman’s charm had turned the lawnmower into an apex predator. It had a voracious appetite that only grass could satisfy.

He was missing lunch with Harry to watch his father play a game of tag with a lawnmower.

Percy turned away from the scene. He was the lookout, tasked with keeping the muggles away while the adults attempted to corner the lawnmower.

“Flank, Arthur! Flank!”

“I’m trying, Otto! Did you put kestrel in this thing?”

“Petrol,” Percy said under his breath. He checked his pocket watch again, cast a muggle-repelling charm, and went to join the fray.

Severus took extra care in shutting down his potions lab for the night. He had paused to chant the ridiculous animagus incantation. While the animagus transformation, sometimes considered the pinnacle of transfiguration among those who had not seen the prowess of Andromeda Tonks, was interesting, that Severus had no conscious choice over which animal he became was problematic. He had reconciled this with the fact that, as his son had put it, he did not have to actually use the transformation. If his form was unfavorable—a slug, perhaps, a worry Harry had confided to him—he needn’t transform. He would see it through to the end.

He lingered in the pristine lab, knowing he was delaying the inevitable. His colleague had invited him to watch a film. He would go to the location, he would watch the film, then he would leave.

Severus looked down at his robes. Charity’s summer residence was a flat in Bristol. She had said to *wear whatever*.

He crossed his arms. Wearing robes to watch a film. A film about tertiary characters in the play *Hamlet*. He had read the play. He was not unfamiliar with the concept of watching a film.

Time was passing. He had to make a decision.

Sighing in resignation, Severus went to his bedroom to unearth his muggle clothes.

Severus read the floo address. A muggle street address.

“Did you enjoy forcing the Floo Network Authority to connect a muggle address?” he asked as he stepped out of the flames.

Charity was lying in wait, wearing a dress. It had a pattern of fluffy clouds and bounding sheep against a pale blue that complemented her eyes.

She always wore dresses, so this was in no way notable.

“I did,” she said, smiling at him. “I’ve just made kettle corn. Have a seat,” she added, pointing to a plush, wide couch. Plenty of space.

He sat down. He did not look around the room.

Charity soon joined him, handing him a bowl of popped corn.

“Ready?” she asked, picking up a rectangular device from the coffee table he had studiously ignored. There were books on it.

“I am as prepared as one can be,” he said, holding the bowl he had been given. Was he expected to eat?

Charity groaned theatrically. “It’s just a picture, Severus. Baby steps. Though, you might get a shock when you see Rosencrantz.”

Severus gave her a questioning look, but it was too late. The film was starting.

Harry arrived at his dad’s house well after dark. He’d had to sneak away from Captain Lament, with whom he had spent hours taking measurements of various gobstones, to perform the animagus incantation. In the middle of the Ministry for Magic. Percy would have a fit.

Lady Madeleine pounced on him immediately, flinging herself around. Despite her size—and she was still growing—she was still a kitten at heart.

“Dad’s gone?” Harry asked, looking around. Spinner’s End was quiet, the same stillness one felt when they were the only one home. For a moment, it made Harry’s skin crawl. It was too familiar. Wandering the house, opening doors, hoping someone would be behind them. But there never was.

He bent down to pick up Lady Madeleine, who went limp as a ragdoll and ramped up her purring.

“I’m going to Tesco,” Harry told her, locating his skateboard near the door.

“Meow.”

“No pets allowed.

“Meow!”

“Fine, you can wait outside.”

They left together, Harry propelling himself down the pitted Cokeworth streets. It was a warm evening, the smog above trapping the heat of the day. It felt close and confining, an airless coffin. It made Harry feel restless.

It wasn't a long trip.

The car park was mostly empty when he arrived, so Harry rolled around for a while, landing a few nollie hardflips to get back in the swing of things. One of the guards came out to stare at him, which Harry took as a sign to stop. He picked up his board, smiled at the security guard, and entered the shop.

"Meow."

"No, you've got that at home. I'm getting something for—"

Harry stopped in the middle of an aisle and looked down at Lady Madeleine.

"I told you to wait outside," he said. She blinked up at him with her big, innocent green eyes.

Someone laughed nearby.

"Don't squabble with a cat, lad," an elderly man said. "They're near as stubborn as my wife!"

"Meow."

"If we get kicked out, it's your fault," Harry muttered.

Lady Madeleine brushed past him, running down another aisle. Harry chased after her, hoping she didn't pick out anything too expensive.

Percy's father sent him home as soon as the lawnmower was secured, assuring Percy he would not be in any trouble for missing half a day of work. He apparated away with Otto Bagman, leaving Percy in muddy clothes, standing in a torn up field.

He'd have to make it up to Mr. Crouch. He would go home, get changed, then return to the office to put in his hours.

He apparated to the Burrow, pausing a moment to vanish some of the dirt. He didn't want to answer any questions.

His mother greeted him as soon as he was in the house. "Where is your father?" she asked.

"He had to speak with Mr. Bagman," Percy said, wishing he had apparated directly into his room. That was an idea. Why hadn't he been doing that the whole time?

Ginny and Mafalda were in the living room, Ginny trying to get Mafalda interested in quidditch. Mafalda seemed more interested in discovering how the pictures in Ginny's magazine moved. While his mother fussed over him, Percy watched Mafalda unwrap a toffee wrapped in bright pink foil.

The sight put Percy at ease. Mafalda was less skittish, more willing to socialize. She could survive being abandoned.

The touching scene was ruined when Mafalda's tongue started to swell.

Ginny screamed, scrambling away from their cousin. Her tongue hung down to her chin, hanging heavily from her face, writhing like some horrible worm. Their mother spun around, her eyes going wide with shock. Mafalda fell on the floor, clawing at her face, trying to make it stop. His mother reached for her wand, but it turned into a copper duck. Mafalda's tongue was nearly a foot long, making it hard for her to breath.

Percy finally got his own wand out. What were Fred and George's O.W.L.s? Charms. Transfiguration. It could have been a potion. He had no idea what had been done to that toffee.

Ginny started to cry, while their mother screamed bloody murder, trying to find her actual wand. Percy hurried forward, telling Mafalda that he was going to help, to stop moving so he could fix it. She was crying too, and she closed her eyes and shook with fear, flinching away when Percy tried to touch her shoulder. After a minute, he managed to return her tongue to its original size.

When he was certain her tongue would not start growing again, Percy looked up at his mother. He had never, in his life, seen her so incandescently furious. She had finally found her wand in her apron. She wiped her eyes, checked on her daughter and niece, then stormed up the staircase. Percy heard a door blasted open, the indignant cries of Fred and George. The lights in the house flickered, and the shouting began.

Percy looked at his sister, at his cousin. They looked back at him with wide, tearful eyes. Both had brown eyes, like his mother.

What could he do to comfort them?

Percy cast a silencing charm, and the shouting cut off.

"Let's go to the kitchen and have tea," he suggested, leading the way.

The girls silently followed him.

Wound Too Tight

Chapter Summary

August 22nd, 1994

Percy awoke before dawn. He rose from bed, narrowly avoiding cracking his shins against his desk, a habit born of years of experience.

The duvet on his bed was heavily patched, a throw blanket crocheted by his mother folded at the foot. His robes for the day were hung on the wall, waiting to be worn. A slight breeze came in through the window. He could hear the sleepy clucks and rustling from the henhouse, could see the pigs sleeping in their straw. The house was quiet, save for the occasional rattling of the pipes courtesy of the ghoul.

It was a small room. Austere.

He never asked for anything, so his parents assumed he never wanted for anything.

He had a place to sleep, a place to work, and places for his books.

Percy made his bed, straightened up his desk, and took a single book from his ceiling. He set it on his desk, then left his room to perform his ablutions.

His room was next to Fred and George's. Fred and George's room currently did not have a door as their mother had removed it. A bit hastily, as Bill and Charlie were visiting for the remainder of summer. They were staying in Fred and George's room, Mafalda was staying in Bill and Charlie's old room, and Fred and George were relegated to Ron's room.

Neither Bill nor Charlie had bothered conjuring a door.

Percy quietly walked up the stairs, pleased to be the first to use the shower that day. He never liked using the shower after someone else.

When he was finished, he returned to his room and sat on his bed. He stared out of the window, watching the sky grow lighter. He knew he needed to start working, that was the whole reason he got up so early. And yet, this always seemed to happen. He wasted time sitting quietly in his room, enjoying the rare peace at the Burrow.

It wasn't meant to be for long. His mother was stirring, which would begin the cascade of Weasleys. So Percy got dressed for work. Midnight blue robes, the color so deep it looked black in the predawn light. It was festive.

He arrived at the kitchen before his mother. He took the opportunity to make his own coffee, before it could be adulterated. He needed to visit St. Mungo's, or reach out to Madam Pomfrey to learn her source for litorin. Perhaps Professor Snape would know someone. Percy could even get his opinion on cauldron thickness.

Percy quickly got his planner out, jotting down a note. Interviewing potioners, people who were most impacted by cauldron quality. Why hadn't he thought of it sooner? He tucked the planner away again. He poured a measure of instant coffee into a mug.

"Oh, Percy, you didn't have to do that," his mother said, bustling into the kitchen. "It's your birthday!"

"Good morning, mother," Percy said, placing his instant coffee on the very top shelf, which none of his siblings could reach.

"Happy birthday," she said, pulling him into a hug. Percy willed the water to boil faster. His mother was eerily attuned to the goings-on at the Burrow. She had a sense for when one of her children was up to something. That she hadn't known what the twins had been doing had come as a shock to all. Percy, for his part, hadn't cared enough to investigate. He had only been annoyed by all the noise. Productive noise, apparently.

His mother released him so she could start making breakfast. The water came to a boil, and Percy poured it over the granules, stirring.

"I hope you aren't going in to work early," his mother said, scoring a pattern into a loaf that had been left to proof overnight.

"Not today," Percy said, taking out his planner and golden fountain pen. The pen was very convenient. Unlike self-inking quills, the pen's reservoir did not have a tendency to leak. Its ink-absorption feature made adjusting his schedule easy.

Percy had kept the pen secreted away during his last year at Hogwarts. Using it would have been admitting to something he was unable to confront. Now he carried it with him everywhere.

"Are you looking forward to this evening?" his mother asked. She continued before he could respond. "It's so exciting! All of your brothers are here..."

She wiped her eyes, then continued working on breakfast for ten people. A feast.

"I am," Percy said. It was true. The year before, his family had been surprisingly considerate on his birthday. Touring the Egyptian Ministry, acquiring muggle food. And this year, Harry was invited over.

"It's a shame Penelope can't make it," his mother said, putting the loaf in the oven. She wiped her hands on her apron, then picked up a basket and left the kitchen. Out to collect eggs, a chore which ought to have fallen to one of his siblings.

It took some time for the house to wake up. Percy finished his coffee and was making a second cup when Charlie came in.

“Morning, Perce,” his brother said through a yawn. “Is that coffee?”

“Muggle coffee,” Percy said.

Charlie nodded, then joined their mother at the counter to make tea. His older brothers knew about his condition. The others had been far too young to understand why Percy had to go to St. Mungo’s so often, or even notice that he did.

Next was Bill, who their mother tutted at. Hair too long, too many fangs in his ears. Percy didn’t understand her objection to either, given how varied magical fashions were. It was another thing that was fine for someone else’s child, but not her own.

Would she object to Harry?

He tapped his pen idly, looking over his schedule.

St. Mungo’s. They had taken Mafalda there, after the toffee incident. She needed to be inoculated against various magical pathogens, though with a squib father it was likely she had built some immunity. Percy hadn’t gone with, he’d been at work, but he had overheard Ginny and Mafalda telling Ron about all the bizarre things they had seen at the hospital. It helped Mafalda put her own experience in perspective. Magical accidents happened to even the most experienced witches and wizards.

That did not make what Mafalda had gone through less awful, nor Fred and George less responsible for their carelessness. Children were resilient though, and his family had short memories. They moved on.

By the time everyone was crammed into the kitchen, the sun had broken over the horizon and breakfast was ready. His mother’s timing was impeccable, and she served the food while his siblings jostled for their places. Ron was still in his pajamas, and wet for some reason. Ginny had the pinched look of someone who had been up late, likely having broken into the broomshed. Fred and George were grinning, no doubt related to the reason behind Ron smelling like a pond. Charlie was making a valiant effort to help with breakfast, but their mother shooed him away. Bill was chatting with their father, while Mafalda read an old copy of *A History of Magic*.

The table groaned under the weight of plates, tea pots, bowls of sugar and cream, a pile of eggs, stacks of toast, a tray of sizzling kippers, pots of beans, crackling bacon, berries fresh from the garden. Percy’s stomach clenched at the sight of it all. He couldn’t do two big meals at the Burrow that day. He couldn’t afford it.

The post came, a blessed distraction. Charlie caught Errol before he crashed, divesting the old owl of his load. A less ragged owl delivered Percy’s *Daily Prophet*. News of the Triwizard Tournament had yet to break, and it was still dominated by the Quidditch World Cup. Percy couldn’t wait for the news cycle to move on.

“Could I read the finance section when you’re done?” Bill asked.

Percy nodded absently—one of the columnists wrote in Gobbledegook, which took too long for Percy to translate. He scanned the headlines, and one article caught his eye. His stomach dropped.

Cauldrons or Vampires? — Ministry Playing High Stakes Games

By RITA SKEETER

Percy read the snippet, then flipped to the full article. He paled, his fingers gripping the paper.

...spate of spontaneous vampiric combustion...Society for the Tolerance of Vampires, headquartered in Diagon Alley...Department of International Magical Cooperation directs its resources to regulating cauldron imports, rather than monitoring the influx of vampires from....should recommit to stamping out the vampire epidemic...

His mouth twisted in disgust. They had been lucky that Skeeter hadn’t connected the arrest of Peter Pettigrew to their family. Percy had never considered how she got her information, only glad he hadn’t been targeted.

Her censure of a junior staff member’s project, just one person out of a department with dozens of employees, raised the question. How *had* she got the information? Percy had only told a handful of people. No one was quoted in the article, no sources cited. She hadn’t mentioned his name, though Percy was certain Skeeter knew it given it was *his* project she was shitting all over.

Percy closed his eyes. Slowed his breathing. He had to clear his mind, let go of his emotions. Getting upset at one woman’s opinion—a prolific and popular journalist, whose opinions were disseminated to the entire magical community—would not do him any favors. He would not allow it to impact his day or affect the quality of his work.

“Alright, Perce?” Charlie asked, leaning over.

“Yes,” he said, looking over the article again. He would speak with Mr. Crouch about a press release. “The *Prophet* has merely continued its mission to promulgate ignorance and fear.”

“What’s that?” his mother said from down the table.

Percy removed the financial section and passed it to Bill, who was looking at him curiously. "Only an incorrect opinion about the importance of cauldron quality standards."

Ron groaned through a mouthful of eggs. "No one cares."

Clear the mind, let go of emotions.

"Be nice," Ginny hissed. Ron yelped, then glared at her. "It's his birthday!"

"Oh," Ron said, reaching down to rub his leg. "Right."

Percy sighed. That was typical, the lack of enthusiasm. It didn't matter what day it was, or what Percy did. It wasn't as impressive as shepherding dragons, or fighting mummies, or inventing prank toffees.

Their mother had already moved on, and was listing all the chores she expected Fred and George to do that day. Muck out the pig pen and henhouse, degnome the garden, pick weeds...

"It was an accident!" Fred exclaimed. "We've told you a million times, if we were going to give a Ton-Tongue Toffee to anyone, it would be Ron!"

"Oi!" Ron said.

"Or Percy," George added, grinning at him.

"We tested it on ourselves first," Fred said heatedly. "We made sure it was safe!"

Their mother bristled. "And you think that makes it better?"

"I'll eat one, right now," George said, pulling out a brightly foiled toffee. "Mafalda, would that make us square?"

Mafalda's eyes gleamed. "Do it."

"No!" their mother snapped, standing up. "No more Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes! I thought I'd got all of those! *Accio!*"

Percy closed his paper. He glanced at his father, who was hiding behind his copy of the *Daily Prophet*, in his own little world.

"Are you taking the day off?" Charlie asked over the shouting.

"No," Percy said, checking *breakfast with family* off in his planner. "I'm going in early."

"I thought the twins' idea was clever," Bill said, as said twins were chased into the garden by their mother. "I'm glad they've got a plan for their future. Mum's been worried."

"She's writing you about them too?" Charlie asked, sharing a smile with Bill.

“I think you’re the only one she’s proud of, Perce,” Bill said, touching the fang dangling from his ear.

“I agree that it is a relief Manfred and Georgius have some awareness that they need a means by which to support themselves,” Percy said, ignoring Bill’s comment. “If only they were a bit more clever.”

“Are those really their names?” Mafalda asked, her face lighting with amusement.

Ginny snickered.

“What are you laughing at, *Ginevra*?” Charlie asked.

“Don’t call me that, *Charles*!”

Percy watched his siblings squabble for a moment, then stood to leave. No one noticed.

“I will have the report ready by Tuesday, sir,” Percy said.

“That’s a bit sooner than I expected, Weatherby,” Mr. Crouch said. Percy had gone to his office first thing, knowing Mr. Crouch hadn’t any appointments at the time. He had committed the man’s schedule to memory. He was surprised to see Bertha Jorkins sitting at the secretary’s desk instead of Hyacinth Greengrass, but knew Miss Jorkins had worked under Mr. Crouch before. The man had spoken fondly of her. Harry had mentioned Lament was doing a good job organizing refreshments for the teams, and some shuffling around wasn’t unusual.

“I read Skeeter’s article this morning,” Percy began.

Mr. Crouch’s lips thinned. “Being critical of the Ministry sells papers, Weatherby. We have a job to do, no matter how public opinion is swayed.”

“Weasley, sir,” Percy said. “And very well put, sir. Shall I draft a press release?”

“No need,” Mr. Crouch said, picking up a memo that had just landed on his desk. “It would only get lost in the World Cup reporting.”

Percy left Mr. Crouch’s office feeling unsettled, and overwhelmed. The more he thought about cauldron bottoms, the more ways he found to expand upon his report. And he needed that report done by Tuesday. It had to be perfect. He needed to impress Mr. Crouch so he would be more amenable to his proposal. He’d have to work over the weekend to meet his self-imposed deadline.

That was fine. He had nothing better to do.

Percy didn't stop working during lunch. He gathered his papers, scrolls, binders, notes, and several books on potions, cauldrons, and metallurgy. He needed another perspective, and did not want to trouble his superiors with petty concerns. He was meant to make their jobs easier, not create new problems for them to solve.

"Hey, Percy."

Harry had arrived early. He leaned against Percy's cubicle wall, watching him with a soft expression. He was in his muggle clothes, his usual boots and trousers, wearing the seahorse shirt Percy had given him. His hair was tousled, windswept from hours of flying.

"Evans," Percy said, sitting upright. "How long have you been there?"

"Not long," Harry said casually. "You were busy."

Baby seahorses drifted across his shirt.

"I'm always busy," Percy pointed out. "You are free to interrupt any time you wish. It is no bother."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I'll keep that in mind. I read the article this morning,"

Percy closed his eyes, his annoyance renewed. "A load of rubbish."

"I know," Harry said, taking out his wand.

"Evans," Percy started, "you can't—"

Harry wordlessly conjured a chair for himself and took a seat, scooting to join Percy at his desk.

"Have you lost your mind?" Percy whispered harshly. "Underage magic? In the middle of the Ministry?"

"You have no idea what I'd do in the middle of the Ministry," Harry said, smiling at him in a way that made Percy's heart skip a beat. "Anyway, I reckoned that article would light a fire under your arse, so I decided to bring lunch to you."

Harry began removing things from his bag, and Percy hastily cleared space on his desk. His stomach gave an embarrassing growl. He hadn't eaten all day.

"I *was* going to take you out to lunch," Harry said, "but I'll do that another time. We can work while we eat."

"We?" Percy said faintly. "I did wish to consult with you on this matter, but you needn't—"

“Oh, I forgot to mention,” Harry said, holding out a small box to Percy. “Happy birthday, Percy.”

He looked at Harry, then to the box he held. “Thank you.”

“Go on, open it,” Harry said. “It’s not your gift, just so you know. I’ll give that to you later.”

Feeling uncharacteristically shy, Percy opened the box.

Fairy cakes. Baked golden, dusted with sparkling sugar, topped with raspberries and coconut flakes.

“I thought you should have at least one cake you could enjoy,” Harry said. He was looking at the floor, his hair hiding his face, rubbing the back of his neck.

Percy realized, with a start, that Harry was nervous too. It was a relief he wasn’t the only one.

“It’s perfect,” Percy said.

Harry looked up at him and smiled.

Lunch was a devastatingly short one hour. There was no time to waste. As they ate the sandwiches Harry had made—liverwurst, soft and savory, dark green lettuce, crisp slices of red onion, a grainy mustard that made his mouth water—they talked about cauldron bottoms.

“It sounds so simple when you leave it at ‘cauldron bottoms’,” Harry said. “First you have to define ‘cauldron.’ Do you mean any receptacle for potion making? Are we including fire crab shells in that category? What about glass cauldrons? If we’re restricting this to metal cauldrons, which metals?”

Percy nodded along. “That is my main problem, narrowing the scope. I suppose the first question is if it should be narrowed at all.” He uncovered a folder and took out a sheaf of data. “Here, you can see leakages in pewter cauldrons have increased by only half a percent over the past decade. But *here*, brass cauldrons are up five percent since last year. I haven’t seen any data on collapsible or self-stirring cauldrons.”

Harry frowned as he looked over the statistics. “Cauldron size, material, additional features it may have. We also need to know how often the cauldron is being cleaned, *how* it is being cleaned, how it’s stored, what is being brewed. There are so many factors. Not to mention that it’s in the interest of cauldron manufacturers to sell a product that needs frequent replacement. We need to look at the cost to the potioneer. How many cauldrons have your brothers melted?”

They finished their food and continued their discussion. Percy’s worry that Harry would find cauldron thickness boring was unfounded. If anything, Harry was a zealous advocate for

cauldron safety standards.

“That article really pissed me off,” Harry said as he packed up. “*Stamping out the vampire epidemic*, what sort of cun—”

Harry covered his mouth, looking embarrassed. “Sorry.”

Percy blinked at him. “What?”

“We’re at work,” Harry reminded him. “Decorum is to be expected.”

“Not that many care,” Percy said drily. He didn’t mind if Harry swore. It was...

“No, but *you* do,” Harry said. “I’ll see you later. I’ve a dozen more portkeys to drop off this afternoon. Speaking of, how are you getting the World Cup?”

Percy frowned. “I had no intention of going.”

“Really?” Harry said. “I could’ve sworn—” Harry’s eyes widened. “Never mind.”

“Never mind what?” Percy asked as Harry hastily stood.

“Nothing,” Harry said, backing away.

“Could have sworn *what*, Evans?”

Harry shook his head and turned to flee.

“How are you planning to get to the Burrow?” Percy demanded, standing to watch Harry dash around a corner.

Harry’s head popped around. “I’ll be there after sunset.” He grinned at Percy, then disappeared.

Percy sat back down, perplexed by Harry’s behavior.

He looked at the additional chair at his desk. He should have vanished it.

Percy set his box of fairy cakes upon it, then got back to work.

Percy stood at the kitchen door, looking across the darkening hills. He had changed out of his robes, donning trousers and a shirt. He didn’t want Harry to feel out of place.

The sun was a reddish glow spilling over the horizon.

After sunset.

He wished Harry had been more specific about his arrival time.

Behind him, his mother was hard at work putting together his birthday dinner. The Burrow had been subject to fewer explosions since Fred and George lost access to their room. Percy had heard they'd been cleaning all day. There was a guest coming, after all. A guest who had effectively saved their sister's life.

"What time did he say he's coming, dear?" his mother asked, joining him at the door.

"After sunset," Percy said. "I would assume immediately after sunset. Evans is not one to be late."

"Did he say how he's getting here?" she asked worriedly.

Percy shook his head. Floo, Knight Bus. For all he knew, Harry had been apparating for years. Or had invented a new mode of transportation.

"Mum, I think I see him!" Ginny shouted. She and the others had been taking advantage of Bill and Charlie being back to have a three-versus-three quidditch match. Mafalda was watching from an old toy broom their mother had dug up, flying close to the ground.

Percy looked to the sky. Harry had been out delivering portkeys. It made sense he would be flying.

"Alright, game over!" his mother said, waving a wooden spoon and hurrying towards their makeshift pitch. "Ronald, put that quaffle down! Now! Do *not* make me fly up there!"

Percy left her to herd his siblings, walking to the garden gate to greet Harry. Harry sat sideways on his broom, instead of straddling it like others did. Most modern brooms had cushioning charms—Percy knew the Nimbus series did, he heard his brothers and sister go on about it enough—which made sitting astride more comfortable. Why Harry eschewed this, he had no idea.

As Harry neared, Percy saw that his cat was perched neatly on the broom bristles. Harry landed smoothly, letting her jump down before he shoved the entire broom into his bag. The cat—half-kneazle—walked up to Percy and butted her head against him.

"Hello, my Lady," he said, bending down to pet her. "You know, *after sunset* describes a rather long period of time."

"I know," Harry said. "I changed my route so it wouldn't take long to get here. It's nice to see your house up close. I've only seen it from a distance."

Percy valiantly fought down a blush at the reminder of his...absconding...with Harry. "Mother is excited to show you around."

"Doesn't everyone already know me?" Harry asked, looking over to the nearing horde of Weasleys, plus Prewett.

"Harry!" his mother said. "I'm so glad you could make it!"

“Me too,” Harry said with a warm smile. The rest of Percy’s family was close behind, having abandoned their brooms in the grass. Fred and George, who had both been in bad moods all day, were now grinning. It was ominous.

“Good evening, assorted Weasleys,” Harry said, waving at them. Ginny waved back. The twins made a less welcoming gesture.

“What’s he doing here?” Ron asked. “Ow! Stop kicking me!”

“Stop being a git!” Ginny snapped.

“Harry is Percy’s guest,” their mother said sharply. She turned back to Harry and smiled. “You’re just in time for dinner. Oh, dear, I don’t think we can all fit in the kitchen. Bill, Charlie, get your father and move the tables outside. Percy, would you show Harry where he could put his bag? Fred, George, if I see a *single* gnome...”

Harry looked at Percy expectantly.

“Follow me,” Percy said, turning on his heel as his mother issued more orders.

“I get to see the inside too,” Harry said, looking around the kitchen. “I haven’t been in many magical homes.”

“I can give you a tour later,” Percy said, noting how eagerly Harry was taking everything in. Had he *ever* been in a magical home, other than Hogwarts? “It’s not safe to leave your belongings out. You may store your bag in my room.”

Percy led Harry through the kitchen and to the living room. His father was on the couch, tinkering with a toaster.

“Is that Harry Evans?” he said, looking up from his project. “It’s good to see you.”

“It’s nice to see you too, Mr. Weasley,” Harry said, stepping forward to shake his hand. “Thank you for inviting me over.”

“Dad?” Charlie called from the kitchen. “Could you come help with the tables?”

“Right,” his dad said, pushing himself up. “You boys don’t take too long. Your mother’s been looking forward to this dinner all week!”

Harry had noticed the family clock in the corner, all hands pointed at *Home*.

“There’s another clock in the kitchen,” Percy said, leading Harry to the stairs. “My room is on the second floor.”

“I really do like your house,” Harry said as they walked up the stairs. “It’s not pretending to be anything other than magical.”

“We’re very fortunate,” Percy said, his nerves skyrocketing as they reached the second floor. He needed to pencil in some more occlumency practice. This was going to kill him.

“We have arrived,” he said, stopping in front of his bedroom door. “It’s not as interesting as the rest of the house.”

“I doubt that,” Harry said, his eyes sparkling.

Percy sighed, then opened his door. He stepped aside to let Harry in first.

“Whoa,” Harry said, looking around. “I mean, I had imagined...I...you have a lot of books.”

“Yes,” Percy agreed. He left the door open.

“You hung books from the ceiling,” Harry said, looking up.

“I did.”

“I wish I had thought of that,” Harry said, turning to him. “How are they sorted? By subject?”

Percy cleared his throat. “Yes. Your bag?”

“Oh, right,” Harry said, taking it off. He looked around for a place to put it.

“My bed is fine,” Percy said. “There is something I wanted to give you. A belated gift.”

Harry set his bag on the bed, then picked up the book Percy had laid out that morning. He read the cover, then turned to Percy. “You did not.”

Percy smiled, feeling a little smug.

“*Magical Moral Perspective?*” Harry said, looking at the book again. “I’ve been *dying* to read this, Perce! Have you already read it? I can’t wait to talk to you about it! Wait, I’ve got something for you too.”

Harry gently placed the book down and opened his bag, pulling out a large box wrapped in parchment. He handed it to Percy.

“You should open it now,” Harry said. “It would be hard to explain to your family.”

Percy dumbly held the box for a moment, then shut the door.

He sat down on his bed, gesturing for Harry to do the same, then unwrapped his present.

The parchment wasn’t blank. Inside, Harry had written extensively. One section outlined a spell, an enchantment, while the rest was dense with notes and legal citations.

“You created a spell?” Percy said quietly.

“It’s a modification of a cooking charm,” Harry said. “So, no.”

Percy shook his head, too amazed to question Harry’s sanity. Modifying spells could be as dangerous as creating them.

“Open the box,” Harry prompted, edging closer to him.

Percy opened the box.

Inside was a mint green electric kettle. Percy knew it was electric since it had a plug. His father collected plugs. That was what the spell was for. It was for Percy to use.

In addition to the kettle, there were boxes of tea, *muggle* tea, and containers of instant coffee.

“I don’t know what to say,” Percy said, turning to Harry. His heart hammered in his chest. It was hard to think through it. “Thank you. This is incredibly thoughtful.”

“I’m still working on charming a coffee grinder,” Harry said, sounding frustrated. “It’s easier to use magic directly on them, honestly. And I know it’s not much, but I thought—”

“Percy! Harry!” his mother shouted from the garden. “Dinner’s ready!”

Harry looked out of the window and waved at her, then gave Percy a sheepish grin. “Should we go?”

Percy set his gifts on his desk, grateful his mother had interrupted. If Harry had kept talking, he had no idea what he would have done.

Percy did not know how he made it to the garden.

Harry sat next to him. Their arms kept touching. It was pure torture.

On Harry’s other side was Percy’s mother.

A massive cake dominated the center of the table. It was shaped like a cauldron, strawberry sauce bubbling inside, sweet-scented smoke drifting out of it. It was a magnificent piece of magical culinary art.

“I’ve been working in the Portkey Office,” Harry was saying to his father. “We’ve had to liaise with International Cooperation—”

“I bet,” George said, wagging his eyebrows.

“—given the number of international attendees,” Harry finished, giving George a flat look.

“Harry, have you met Bill and Charlie?”

“I’ve seen them play quidditch...”

“And, if you recall, this is my niece Mafalda. She’s starting Hogwarts this year!”

“That’s really exciting,” Harry said, smiling at Mafalda. “I’m a prefect, so if you need help with anything, feel free to ask.”

“A *Slytherin* prefect,” Ron said, narrowing his eyes.

“We’re harder on our own housemates than anyone else,” Harry said.

“You sure about that?” Fred muttered.

Percy had wondered why the twins sat on his other side. Now he knew. To make him suffer.

“Are you going to the World Cup?” Ginny asked.

“In the most literal sense, yes,” Harry said.

Percy’s father cleared his throat. “That reminds me, everyone. I have an announcement to make.”

He stood up, and the table fell silent.

“I’ve got us tickets to the Quidditch World Cup!” his father announced. “Top Box, with the Minister.”

Percy’s family lost their minds.

“Oh, Arthur!” his mother squealed, hurrying around the table to throw her arms around him.

“Well done, dad!” Ron shouted, Ginny echoing him. Fireworks went off in the twins’ vicinity, showering the tables in sparks. Bill and Charlie had a more subdued reaction, so Percy assumed they had already been told. It was likely why they had both come home.

“You can invite Monty and Hermione,” his dad said to Ron.

“Monty’s already got tickets,” Ron said.

“Then ask if he’d like to camp with us,” his dad said. “We could make a day of it!”

As his family celebrated the tickets, Percy could only think about it cutting into his work time.

“Is this why you asked me how I was getting there?” he asked Harry.

Harry leaned towards him to answer, pressing their shoulders together.

“I saw your family’s name added to the list for Stoatshead Hill,” Harry whispered. “I strongly suggest you apparate.”

Percy nodded, catching a whiff of mint and lavender.

“Why do you always smell like mint?” he thoughtlessly asked.

“Calming Draughts,” Harry said.

Percy’s brow furrowed, but he didn’t press for an explanation. It wasn’t the best time for it.

“Inconsiderate of him pulling that on your birthday,” Harry said. “Sorry.”

Percy shook his head. “It’s fine. It’s a gift for everyone.”

Harry sighed, placing a hand on Percy’s arm. “You give them too much credit.”

The hand withdrew as his family settled back down. The place where Harry had touched him burned.

“So, Evans,” George said once the meal had resumed. “How do you feel about cauldron bottoms?”

Harry glanced at Percy before answering. “Passionately. I cannot stress how important standardization of cauldron thickness is to potioneering.”

“Percy, dear,” his mother said. “Do you know if Penelope is going?”

“Beg pardon?” Percy asked.

“To the Quidditch World Cup?”

“I have no idea,” he said. “I haven’t spoken to her since we ended our acquaintanceship.”

“You what?” his mother gasped. “You never told me that!”

Percy could feel everyone looking at him, except Harry who was eating with renewed gusto. “I did not consider it important enough to share.”

“Not important?” his mother said, shaking her head. “Well, we can discuss that later. She was such a pretty girl! What about you, Charlie? Has anyone caught your eye?”

Charlie laughed. “No. Mum, I’ve told you, I’m not interested in that sort of relationship. With *anyone*. It’s dragons all the way.”

Their mother tutted. “You just haven’t found the right witch is all. I’d *love* to see you boys all settled down with a nice girl!”

“Or bloke,” Fred and George said immediately.

Percy tensed. Next to him, Harry kept eating as if nothing significant had happened.

“For Ginny, of course,” their mother said.

“Mum!” Ginny exclaimed, blushing furiously.

“Or one of us,” George said pointedly, looking around Percy to watch their mother’s reaction.

Their mother scoffed. “Don’t be silly.”

Percy stared at his plate, trying to control his breathing.

“So, Harry,” his father said. “You’re a muggleborn?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said. “Percy’s told me about your plug collection. I’m dead curious to see it.”

Percy’s mother was saying to Mafalda, “*Muggleborn* means he’s been raised by muggles, but also his parents were both muggles.” Mafalda nodded along, giving Harry a shrewd look.

“You are?” his father said, surprised. “I’d be happy to show you around the garage!”

Percy relaxed, glad the conversation had moved on. He felt something press against his legs, and looked down to see Lady Madeleine. She held a dead gnome in her mouth, which she deposited at his feet before climbing onto his lap. She began to purr.

“It’s a present,” Harry whispered. “She likes you.”

Percy placed a hand on Lady Madeleine’s back. Plates began levitating themselves into stacks, and his siblings were already organizing a celebratory quidditch match. Perhaps their birthday present to him was leaving him the fuck alone for once in his life.

Harry hummed appreciatively as Mr. Weasley led him into the garage, Percy trailing behind. It was a large structure, much bigger inside than out, with metal siding and a domed roof. The windows were set high up, and moonlight shone through the dusty panes.

It looked like the den of a muggle hoarder, shelf after shelf packed with old and broken muggle goods. Muggle artifacts. *Misused* muggle artifacts.

“I’ve also got a collection of batteries,” Mr. Weasley said proudly. He removed a crate from one of the shelves and sat it heavily on a work table.

“Really?” Harry asked, walking over to look. “That is a lot of batteries.”

Percy made a choked noise.

“Arthur!” cried Mrs. Weasley’s faint voice.

Mr. Weasley looked abashed. “Best go see what’s happened now. Have a look around, Harry. Percy can show you.”

Mr. Weasley hurried away. Lady Madeleine followed him, giving Harry a loaded look before disappearing.

“You know,” Harry said, picking up an old battery. It had begun to corrode, off-white crystals growing around the cathode, “I cited a law your father wrote.”

“I saw,” Percy said. He gave one of the shelves a disparaging look, then leaned against it. “Father used to bring me in here to help him. I am intimately familiar with that particular law.”

“He wrote in a loophole,” Harry said, turning to smile at Percy. “To exempt himself.”

Percy grimaced. “Not his best moment, but this is what he's passionate about. His life's work.”

Harry returned the battery, hoping Mr. Weasley was more cautious than he seemed. He stepped closer to Percy. “And what's yours?”

Percy swallowed. “I want to be the Minister for Magic. You know that.”

“I do,” Harry said, moving closer. Percy's glasses had started to slip. They always did when he was nervous. “But why?”

“To improve our society,” Percy said. “To stop us from falling apart at the seams. You know what happened during *his* rise to power. He captured the entire Ministry. Departments were filled with his sympathizers. They're still on the Wizengamot.”

They were far enough away from the house for the sounds of Percy's family to be muted. The frogs sang loud in the pond, the chirps of crickets fading as the evening cooled. Dust motes danced through the air, catching the moonlight. He felt surrounded by stars.

And there was Percy.

Harry was close enough to touch him now, could see the intensity of Percy's hazel eyes, could count every freckle.

“You think changing a few laws will fix that?” Harry asked.

He reached up, slow enough that Percy could move away, and gently pushed Percy's glasses back up. Percy's breath hitched, but Harry didn't stop. His fingers traced Percy's cheek, the shell of his ear, sank into his soft, coppery curls. He tugged gently, bringing Percy closer to him.

Percy closed his eyes, his lips falling apart as Harry pressed into him. He felt Percy's arms tentatively reach for him, settling around Harry's waist. It was the bravest thing Harry had ever witnessed.

“I want,” Percy began, shuddering as Harry ran a hand up his side. “I want to change the world.”

Harry smiled against Percy's lips, then kissed him.

Joyride

Chapter Summary

Still August 22nd, 1994

Chapter Notes

I'm glad you all liked the last chapter. Took a bit to get there, eh?

If anyone wants a laugh, compare the comments from last chapter to those of Chapter 46

Harry pulled Percy over to one of Mr. Weasley's work tables, grinning at the starstruck expression on his face. Harry couldn't believe it either. He couldn't believe he was allowed to touch Percy, allowed to be close enough to do so. There was that peculiar, sweet smell that lingered around Percy. The memory of that scent would get stuck in Harry's head, and he would smell it at the strangest times. It was agonizing.

He jumped to sit upon the table, pulling Percy close to him once more. Now they were at the same level, and he could see the conflict in Percy's eyes.

"Harry," Percy began.

Harry delicately wrapped his fingers around Percy's throat, just to watch his reaction. The reddened tips of his ears, the darkening of his eyes, the pupils blown wide. Harry leaned forward, brushing his lips against Percy's.

"I already know what you're going to say," he breathed. "I've anticipated all of your objections. I've written an extensive rebuttal."

Percy melted against him, and Harry jealousy hoarded how Percy's body felt against his. He'd downed two Calming Draughts while flying to the Burrow, knowing what he planned to do, knowing that his heart would burst no matter how Percy had responded.

"I know I'm still in school," Harry said, moving to whisper against Percy's ear. Percy shivered, bracing his hands on either side of him. "I know how you feel about that. I knew there was something else too. What your family would think. You want them to be proud of you. I know I'm poor, I know I'm—"

Percy pressed his forehead against Harry's. "It's not that, Harry. Some of it, true. I can't... you're only sixteen."

Harry tilted Percy's chin up, pleased at how easily Percy allowed himself to be pushed around. It wasn't something Harry knew he wanted, until he had it.

"For now," he said.

Harry kissed Percy again, because he could, because he wanted to savor him for as long as this moment lasted. As long as Percy would let him.

"There's more," Percy said, pulling back to meet his eyes. "Something I...something I did. To you. To myself."

Harry sighed. "It doesn't matter."

Percy placed his hands on Harry's thighs. He was shaking again. Harry thought he knew why. Because he was another boy. Because Percy's mother wouldn't approve. How long had Percy listened to her?

"It does," Percy said, running his hands up Harry's sides. It felt so dangerous, and Percy was moving closer to a secret of Harry's own. "I did something shameful. I dishonored you."

Harry wanted to laugh—how could Percy's secrets be worse than his own?—but he needed to take Percy seriously. "Then tell me. When you're ready. You know I have secrets too."

Percy's hands stopped moving, but Harry's didn't. He reached for Percy's shirt, wanting to tug it out of his trousers. Wanting to see more. Wanting to feel more. It was pathetic how he clung to such brief moments. The arch of Percy's neck. A sliver of exposed stomach.

Lady Madeleine started wailing.

"Shit," Harry said. "Your dad's back."

He had to hold onto Percy so he didn't run off. "Calm down."

Percy's eyes were wild, and he had started shaking again, but Harry watched in fascination as he collected himself. Calm, composed. Not at all like someone on the verge of being snogged within an inch of his life.

"Apparate us to your room," Harry suggested, smiling coyly at Percy.

"Be sensible, Evans," Percy said, taking a step back. Harry let him go and hopped down from the table, just as the door to the garage opened.

"I'll tell you a secret," Harry said, leaning in close. "What name do you think you call me in my—"

"Bad news, Percy," Mr. Weasley said, rounding a shelf. "Fred and George tossed one of their fireworks into the cake. Your mother is absolutely spitting mad."

Harry looked at Percy to gauge his reaction. Harry could tell he had been studying occlumency, as he had the same blankness Monty did as a beginner. With so many demands on his time, Harry was impressed Percy had managed to include that.

“Do you think they did it on purpose?” Harry asked. “Owing to Percy’s condition?”

Mr. Weasley gave him a puzzled look. “What do you mean, Harry?”

Percy stiffened next to him, but Harry ignored it. If Percy wouldn’t stand up to his family, Harry would do it for him.

“Well, he can’t have certain foods, can he?” Harry said. “The cake might have been too much magic for him.”

Mr. Weasley’s eyes widened in understanding. “Ah, well, Fred and George wouldn’t know that. I’m surprised Percy told you.”

“I didn’t,” Percy said, his voice near emotionless. “Harry worked it out himself, based on my symptoms.”

“Did you?” Mr. Weasley said, giving Harry an appraising look.

Harry shrugged. “I end up in the hospital wing a lot. I’ve got an idea. We could pop over to a supermarket in town. I’m sure they’ve got muggle cakes for sale.”

Mr. Weasley brightened. “A supermarket? I’ve never been to one of those. How is it different from a regular market?”

Harry explained what a supermarket was to Mr. Weasley as they walked back to the house. Percy was still impassive, almost robotic. Harry knew he would snap out of it eventually, once he came to terms with what they had done. Once he was able to be honest with himself.

Harry suppressed a sigh. He knew how important family was to Percy. How important family was to himself. He wouldn’t ask Percy to choose between them. By that same token, he wouldn’t be hidden away. Harry had learned his lesson with Cedric. He would not lower himself for someone else. He deserved better than that.

The Burrow was dead quiet when they walked into the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley was there, her face blotchy from mourning the fate of the beautiful cake she had created. Harry wished he had seen its destruction.

“Molly, Harry’s had a fantastic idea,” Mr. Weasley said, sitting down next to his wife. She leaned into him, drawing comfort from his presence.

Harry wanted that. He wanted that with Percy.

Mrs. Weasley sniffled. “An idea?”

“We could get a muggle cake for Percy,” Harry said. “It wouldn’t take a minute to pick one up. I’ve got cash—muggle money—with me. I’d be happy to pay.”

Mrs. Weasley started crying again, mumbling something incoherent.

“She says that’s very kind of you,” Mr. Weasley translated. “Why don’t you two take the car?”

This roused Percy. “The Ford Anglia?”

Harry turned to him, hoping to convey how much he wanted to go joyriding in his dad’s illegal flying car.

“The very same,” Mr. Weasley said.

There was the sound of something shattering, and a Ron-like roar of outrage, from upstairs.

Mrs. Weasley leapt out of her seat and marched out of the room, her anger renewed. “What is going on up there!”

“Go on, you two,” Mr. Weasley said. He looked excited, despite his home being turned into a warzone. “I’ll get a handle on things here.” He got up and left the kitchen, following in his wife’s wake.

Feeling bold, Harry took Percy’s hand. Percy flinched, and gave him a look of consternation.

“No one’s watching,” Harry said. “And we can do more of that in the car.”

Percy was speechless, his ears going completely red. “Harry—”

“We’re going to take your dad’s illicit flying Ford Anglia down to Ottery St. Catchpole, and we are going to buy you a cake,” Harry said, pulling Percy out of the house. He let go of Percy’s hand, not wanting to push their luck. He turned around to watch Percy, walking backwards out of the garden, hoping he didn’t trip over a garden gnome. Lady Madeleine ran out of the hedge and jumped onto his shoulder.

“You’re getting too big for that,” Harry said, putting a hand up to stabilize her.

“Meow.”

“I’m skint, I’m not getting that.”

“Meow!”

“Then ask *him*.”

Harry watched as comprehension dawned in Percy’s eyes, bringing him fully back to life.

“You still have your babelfish,” Percy said.

“That’s one thing I like about you,” Harry said, turning around to walk to the garage again. He’d seen the car in there. “You’re one of the smartest people I know.”

“It was not that big a leap, Evans,” Percy said, using his long stride to catch up to Harry.

“Everyone forgets about Frankie,” Harry said, lifting Lady Madeleine from his shoulder so he could carry her in his arms. “Out of sight, out of mind. And back to *Evans*, are we?”

Percy sighed noisily. “Harry. What I was saying earlier—”

“You can tell me when we’re in the air,” Harry said, stopping in front of the garage. “Now, how do we get the car out?”

Percy was fairly certain he’d gone round the bend. There was no other explanation for why he and Harry were in his father’s Ford Anglia, flying towards the muggle town of Ottery St. Catchpole.

“What do you want to tell me?” Harry asked as he fiddled with the stereo. “You know, I’ve known this thing could fly for a while. Since fourth year.”

Percy shut his eyes in annoyance, opening them immediately once he remembered he was driving. “About what happened in the dungeon...”

Harry looked up at him. “You slag.”

“*Excuse* me?” Percy said, heat rushing to his face.

Harry started laughing. “That’s what I thought at the time. To be fair, I was very recently heartbroken.”

Percy clenched his teeth and forced the words out. “That was intentional.”

“I know,” Harry said, reclining in his seat. “A Ravenclaw prefect and a Gryffindor prefect in a part of the dungeons I skated in specifically because no one ever goes there? I sussed it out. Eventually, once I was able to think straight. It wasn’t exactly subtle, Percy.”

Harry’s cat began to growl.

“I’m sorry,” Percy said. “It was crass, and cruel, and I cannot express how deeply I regret it.”

Harry sighed, stroking Lady Madeleine’s back. “It’s fine. I hardly ever think of Clearwater’s tits anymore.”

Percy spluttered, and Harry began laughing.

“It’s not funny,” he said, glaring at Harry. It wasn’t that long of a flight to Ottery St. Catchpole. Percy had been flying them in circles. He never wanted to land.

“I don’t want to cry about it,” Harry said. “I already did once. And I’ve got a better idea of the reasons for some of the things you did back then.”

Percy gripped the steering wheel. “There’s something else. Something worse.” He wanted to get it all out now, get it over with. He didn’t want it hanging over his head anymore. Aunt Muriel already knew, and he trusted her far less than Harry.

“Oh?” Harry said, looking at him again. “Did you kill someone?”

“What?” Percy said. “No!”

“Then what?” Harry asked, his face tight with concern. “Are you okay?”

“I...I don’t know,” Percy admitted. “Sometimes I miss the way it made me feel.”

Harry sat up. He began to reach out, but drew his hand back.

“I was...” Percy gripped the steering wheel so hard it began to squeal. He just had to say it. He had to say it, then it would be out, and it would be done. “I was potioneering myself. To feel...appropriately...towards Penelope.”

Harry was silent. Percy hung his head, waiting for his judgment.

“I brewed Amortentia,” he whispered. “I—”

Something touched his face. Harry’s hand, cradling his cheek.

“Percy, look at me,” Harry said gently. “Please.”

Percy took a steadying breath, then looked at Harry. The windows were down, and the wind made his hair flutter. His eyes were dark and endless. Percy was in freefall.

“I knew someone was brewing Amortentia in the castle,” Harry said. “I was looking for the symptoms. I know you didn’t take it.”

“I almost did,” Percy said. “Over winter break. It would have killed me, I think.”

“I wish you didn’t feel like you had to take it,” Harry said softly, letting go of Percy’s face so he could pry one of his hands from the steering wheel. Percy watched Harry lace their fingers together. “I’m so sorry, Percy.”

Percy shook his head. He needed to land. He couldn’t keep going in circles. “You did nothing wrong.”

“I should have noticed something was wrong,” Harry said firmly. “Someone should have.”

Percy gave a harsh laugh. “Aunt Muriel did. She shoved a bezoar down my throat, all the while complaining how expensive it was.”

“I knew I liked her for a reason,” Harry said. He sighed heavily. “Jesus fucking Christ on a stick.”

“I like it when you swear,” Percy said abruptly. “I find it ridiculously endearing. Particularly ones of muggle origin.”

Harry squeezed his hand. “I’ll tell you something I did. Not to myself,” Harry quickly added. “To Cedric.”

Percy landed the Ford Anglia in an overgrown lot. He could see the lit marquee of a supermarket a few blocks away. He’d cast so many muggle-repelling charms at the car he could have flown it down the high street.

He looked at his hand in Harry’s. Harry’s hand was warm, firm, calloused. A perfect fit.

“What did you do to Diggory?” Percy asked. “Castrate him, I hope.”

Harry smiled faintly, but didn’t laugh. He looked out of a window, his eyes growing distant. Lady Madeleine started purring.

“I told him something private,” Harry said. “I didn’t like his reaction, so I Obliviated him.”

Percy took a moment to form a response. He couldn’t give a rat’s arse about Diggory’s mind. He doubted there was much to Oblivate. “If you took that sort of measure, his response must have been unconscionably repugnant.”

Harry shrugged. “I expected it. I was testing him, knowing that was the likely outcome.” Harry suddenly gripped his hair, scowling. “I’m not usually this honest with anyone. And it’s your birthday. God, this is selfish.”

“I’m not very invested in my birthday,” Percy said. “I only participate for my mother’s sake.”

“Okay, that’s enough misery for tonight,” Harry said. He opened his door. Lady Madeleine jumped out and disappeared in the grass. “We’re getting a fucking cake.”

Harry tugged on Percy’s hand, and to Percy’s utter surprise he floated out of his seat. “Harry, what—”

“A modification of *levicorpus*,” Harry said absently, shutting the door as gravity reasserted itself. “I stumbled upon it while analyzing the spell.”

Percy felt unsteady as he landed. “But, how—”

Harry pushed him against the car, smirking at Percy’s gasp.

“I’m learning all sorts of things about you today,” Harry said thoughtfully. He leaned forward, close enough to kiss. “You’re allowed to touch me back, you know.”

Then he backed away and started walking through the swaying grass. “I hope the shop’s not closed.”

Percy waited until he caught his breath, then followed after Harry.

Harry was feeling a bit mad. He had kissed Percy. He'd actually done it. And Percy let him. Percy *liked* it.

"Captain Lament is right," he said, leading Percy through the supermarket. He knew Percy had never been in one, and there were so many things for him to see, but they had already been gone for quite some time. The cake had to be acquired.

"About what?" Percy asked, trying and failing to not boggle at a coupon dispenser.

"The world's gone mad," Harry said. "What sort of cake do you like?"

"I've never been one for cake," Percy said. "Or sweets in general. I had to pick my food carefully. Cakes, chocolates, ice cream, increase my intake of magic without being nutritious. It's a waste."

"Right," Harry said, tallying another mark against the Weasleys. "Normally, for a birthday cake you'd place an order ahead of time so they can decorate it. But they've got pre-made ones. Might be a bit stale this late in the day. What about a madeira cake? We can get a chocolate one too. I doubt it's as good as your mum's, but—"

Percy grabbed his hand. Harry was so stunned he stopped walking. Another shopper gave them a strange look, then turned her trolley down an aisle and sped away.

"Anything you pick will be wonderful," Percy said. "And it will be something I can actually consume."

"Yes," Harry said. He had to explain to Percy about the muggles and their feelings about *the gays*. Was it not covered in Muggle Studies? His dad was cordial to Professor Burbage, maybe he could get her to add it to the curriculum. "We'll get whatever they have, then we can have a look around."

Percy gave him a faint smile. "I would like that."

Percy nearly crashed when they got back to the Burrow. It was late, and they had spent far too long exploring the supermarket. Harry had bought him snacks. Crisps, biscuits, something called a Toblerone. And the cakes too, kept cold in a refrigerator, thick with frosting. Harry had commandeered the radio, and turned up a song about a man made of iron. Percy enjoyed listening to him sing.

But they were back at the Burrow. The fevered mood that had overtaken both of them needed to be banked.

Percy had always considered his birthday more of an event for his mother than himself. She had done all the work in birthing him, after all, and raising him. She put all the effort into celebration.

He always thanked her.

But this year, he had got something he wanted, something he never thought he could have, that he wasn't allowed to have. It was terrifying. He didn't know what he was doing. Harry was going back to Hogwarts. Percy wouldn't see him for months. It was a mistake. He should have more self control. He was the older one, he should have been more responsible.

He pulled into the garage, and Harry leaned over and kissed him.

How was he meant to argue against that?

“Did it work?”

Percy looked up from his book to see Fred and George crowding his doorway.

Harry had left, using the floo to go to the Leaky Cauldron. The muggle cakes had gone over well. Harry and Mafalda were accustomed to it, but to everyone else it was a novelty. Even Fred and George got a piece, after profusely apologizing and agreeing to pay Harry back.

“Did what work?” Percy asked, closing his book.

“Blowing up the cake,” they said, smiling at him.

“Did you and him,” Fred whispered.

“Work it out?” George finished.

Fred gave him an appalled look. George rolled his eyes.

“Did you,” Fred said, “uh, you know?”

“We’ve known you fancied him for ages,” George said, shaking his head.

“He was always looking at the Gryffindor table,” Fred added.

“Secret rendezvous in the library,” George said.

“He sent you muggle sweets,” Fred said.

“We don’t care,” George said hastily. “That you’re...”

“We won’t tell mum,” Fred said.

They waited, leaning closer, their faces alight with anticipation.

Percy opened his book again. “Get out of my room.”

Tasteful

Chapter Summary

August 1994, eve of the Quidditch World Cup

Monty woke up clutching his scar, his breathing ragged. His scar burned, blindingly hot, and he gritted his teeth against the pain. He could hear Hester stirring in her cage, her claws scratching at the bars. She was still inarticulate, not even a month old. The only words she said with any regularity were *food* and *owl*.

He sat up, his stomach roiling. Everything hurt. The dream...it was important, Monty knew that. He *felt* it. His head was pounding. Hester's scratching grew more frantic.

"Shh," Monty said quietly, wincing. "I'm fine."

Hester clearly didn't believe him. He could hear Hedwig stirring now.

Monty carefully opened his eyes, squinting against the pain. He pulled his hand away from his scar, checking his fingers for blood. There was nothing.

He closed his eyes again, lying back down. His scar had never hurt him before he started at Hogwarts, and had only burned occasionally during his first year. It never acted up again, until now.

Monty's skin crawled. He didn't know what it meant, only that it was nothing good.

The dream. The pain had woken him up from a dream. It was a strange dream, brightly colored, distorted images, indistinct. There was a baby, he remembered that. What he *thought* was a baby, until he looked up at it. It was wrong, so aberrant it filled him with mindless dread. Then it opened its mouth to feed.

He could still taste it. Did dreams leave a taste? Blood, and something sweet as syrup, yet tangy. His mouth watered with the urge to vomit.

Monty buried his head in his pillow, wishing everything would just stop.

There was a knock at his door. The noise was so abrasive he wanted to cry.

"Monty, is everything alright in there?"

He hadn't realized how loud Hester was being.

"I'm coming in."

It was Professor Lupin. He kept odd hours, and Monty suspected it was because he was afraid to sleep. Sirius had said it had been a bad moon, which was why Professor Lupin wasn't going to the Quidditch World Cup with them. Monty had suspicions about that too. A werewolf sitting among foreign dignitaries?

There was a weight on his bed, and a cool, scarred hand touched his forehead.

"I woke up with a headache," Monty mumbled, feeling stupid and childish. He didn't need to be coddled.

"Young master needs a potion for his headache," Kreacher rasped. Great, Kreacher was there. More witnesses to Monty's moment of weakness.

"He's burning up, too."

"Kreacher will get the Pepperup."

"I'm fine," Monty insisted.

"You clearly are not," Professor Lupin said gently. He sounded so sad. So tired and sad. "You don't need to suffer unnecessarily. You aren't a martyr."

Monty snorted, thinking about what Harry's response would be. "*You're the anti-martyr. You lived for their sins.*"

Kreacher returned, and Professor Lupin helped him sit up even though Monty really didn't need it. He could not remember anyone helping him when he was sick. They just locked him in the cupboard.

He drank the potions they gave him, and once Hester was finally calmed down, Professor Lupin left.

Monty drifted back to sleep, wondering if it was time to start calling him *Remus*.

When Monty next woke, his scar no longer hurt. The strange dream, the terrible pain that followed, felt very vague and distant in the morning light.

He was unsteady, and slowly made his way to the kitchen for breakfast. After weeks of living at Grimmauld Place, he barely registered the surly portraits, the ghoul banging around the bathroom who Sirius promised they'd tackle together, the vile troll leg umbrella stand, the dark muttering behind Mrs. Black's velvet curtains.

The kitchen was one of his favorite rooms in the house. It was warm and inviting, and he could see the garden through the back door. He'd written back and forth with Neville all month, coaxing it back to life.

Sirius and Professor Lupin were already there. Sirius was smoking, blowing smoke rings that twisted through the air. He'd made noises about wanting to quit, but no one took it seriously. He had a neat little spell that sucked all the smoke away. Professor Lupin was reading the *Daily Prophet* with a small frown. Kreacher was stalking around the table, putting plates out by hand even though Monty knew he could use his magic. Kreacher had been alone with the insane portrait of his mistress for over a decade. He had been lonely, though no one dared voice that.

Monty paused by the doorway, a strange feeling in his chest. He knew what it was, something he couldn't acknowledge. He would have to go back to Privet Drive, eventually. He wasn't allowed to call this *home*.

"How're you feeling?" Sirius asked as soon as he walked in. "Remus said you were sick?"

"I'm better now," Monty said, not wanting to be fussed over. He took his seat, smiling faintly at Professor Lupin. At Remus. Remus smiled back, looking completely exhausted. Monty wasn't sure what a *bad moon* was, but he knew Remus had been wounded. He couldn't be healed with regular magic.

"You've got an owl, from your mate Ron," Sirius said, handing an envelope to him. Ron's name on it was barely legible. Curious, Monty opened it.

Monty, dad got the tickets!

Monty's smile grew. He had been feeling guilty at not inviting Ron, even though Sirius had four tickets. If he, Sirius, and Remus were all going, that only left Monty room for one friend. Between Hermione and Ron, he had chosen Neville. Now Remus wasn't going, and Neville's gran had canceled her weekly game of Wailing Whist to attend. It sounded like an awful game. Whenever you won a trick, the cards screamed at you. Monty didn't see the appeal.

"His dad's got tickets for the World Cup," Monty said.

"Good for them," Sirius said warmly. "I know you wanted to invite all your friends along..."

Monty shrugged. "Ron said his dad could usually get tickets through work." He kept reading, his expression turning grim.

"Oh, no," Remus said. "What's happened?"

"Ron's invited me to spend the night tomorrow," Monty said. "And after the game. Assuming it doesn't last five days."

Sirius grimaced, then took a sip of coffee.

Remus sighed. "You could say no."

Monty looked at the letter again. He hadn't seen Ron or Hermione all summer, but he would be at school with them all year. He had really been looking forward to flying to the game with Sirius, who he'd only got to stay with for a few weeks. But would it upset Ron? He didn't want to alienate the first friend he'd made at Hogwarts.

"If the whole family's going," Sirius said. "They're going by portkey."

Monty set the letter down. "I need a quill."

Severus discreetly observed his son. Harry had been behaving oddly all day. Smiling to himself, looking wistfully out of windows, cradling a hefty book, more smiling. By lunch time, Severus had reached his limit for foolishness.

"Harry."

Harry looked him in the eyes. It was a mistake. He easily slipped into Harry's mind, his son's thoughts flashing by.

Training his cat to sit on his skateboard and kick with one leg.

Absurd.

Severus kept searching.

Drinking his potion, wrinkling his nose at the taste.

The animagus incantation he had faithfully recited that morning.

Watching an older coworker shovel shredded cabbage into his mouth.

The toy thestral prancing around.

No. None of that would make his child act so deranged. What was it?

A letter from his brother, who was looking forward to trying a portkey for the first time. A thrum of annoyance at that. Trepidation? Chagrin?

"If you want to know," Harry said calmly. "You only have to ask."

Severus pulled back, impressed. "You did well at misdirecting me."

"I learned from the best," Harry said, opening his book. *Magical Moral Perspective*.

Severus closed his eyes. That narrowed down the list considerably.

"Something happened with the Weasley brat," Severus finally said.

To his horror, Harry blushed.

“You went to the boy’s family home last night,” Severus said. “A birthday dinner, if I recall. You returned very late.”

“Nothing happened,” Harry said quickly. “Nothing. At all. Ever. What?”

It was a shame Weasley had already graduated. It made it more difficult to monitor his activities.

Harry sighed. This was bad. Severus had suspected his son harbored feelings for the most tolerable Weasley child. The lunches made without magic...he’d been feeding someone else’s child all summer.

“I don’t know,” Harry said, looking at the book in his hands. “His family isn’t exactly... I don’t think they even know he’s...and I’m a student. Which...yeah.”

His son had lost the ability to form complete sentences. It was far worse than Severus had feared.

“Actually,” Harry said, looking up at him again. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Please spare me the details of your...assignment.”

“Not *that*,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “You talk to Professor Burbage sometimes, yeah?”

“The woman never stops talking,” Severus said. “I occasionally respond.”

“Could you talk to her about adding a topic to her curricula?” Harry asked. “I don’t think Percy knows how some muggles view people like us.”

“Wizards?” Severus insincerely suggested.

“*Dad*. Fine, *gay* people.”

Severus sighed. “What did Weasley do to give you the impression that Professor Burbage is deficient in some way?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “That sounded almost defensive.”

Severus waited, not rising to the bait. The less said about his Charity, the better.

“We went to a shop to get him a cake since Fred and George blew up the one his mum made,” Harry said, “and he held my hand.”

“The scandal,” Severus said.

“Some lady ran away from us!”

Severus frowned. “One person’s poor reaction would prevent you from doing such a thing?”

“No,” Harry said, sounding annoyed. Such an ill-mannered child. Severus blamed Weasley’s influence. All of them. “But Percy’s all about keeping up appearances. I don’t think he’d like his muggle neighbors gossiping about him.”

Severus didn’t like what he was hearing. “Harry, if he is ashamed of you—”

Harry shook his head. “It’s not that. I think it’s his family, or maybe just his mum. I don’t know, dad. I need to talk to him.”

The entire situation sat poorly with Severus.

“If he’ll even still talk to me,” Harry muttered. “Maybe he’s having second thoughts. I’m not exactly the safe choice for a future Minister.”

“I will not hear any disparagement of yourself,” Severus said sharply. Harry looked up at him, startled. “If Weasley’s primary concern in his relationships is political expediency, he is not worthy of your time.”

Harry grimaced. “If I really thought he was like that, I wouldn’t bother with him.”

“Good,” Severus said. He would need to send a message to Weasley, something subtle. Perhaps Harry’s friend group could be manipulated into doing it for him. He would have to start laying the groundwork...

Harry dropped his head onto the table and groaned. Where had his son got such theatrics?

“He’s going to be Minister,” Harry mumbled to the table. “He told me himself. He’s so cool.”

Severus immediately left the room, deeply troubled. Something was *very* wrong with his son. Not a single person in the world would have described Percy Weasley as *cool*.

Percy firmly shut his window, cutting off the sound of the ongoing quidditch match. He had intended to work through the weekend, to get the cauldron report in early and begin polishing his other proposal, but there were too many distractions.

He kept thinking about Harry.

He couldn’t believe himself. He couldn’t believe they had done *that* in the garage, where anyone could have strolled in. But Harry’s cat had been on guard. He had taken Percy’s worries into consideration.

Harry deserved better.

Percy removed his glasses and massaged his temples. Instead of his work, Percy had a half written letter on his desk. It was all nonsense, sprawling, rambling, not a single coherent

thought. Apologies, regrets, hopes, dreams.

It was a damning piece of evidence.

He wanted to read Harry's rebuttal.

A bludger slammed into his window, shattering the glass, then reversed and went back the way it came.

"Sorry!"

Percy leaned over to glare at Fred through his broken window. "I am *trying* to work!"

Fred flew after the bludger without replying. If Percy asked him to fix the window, Fred would use the excuse of underage magic, despite their flagrant disregard for that law. They'd all watched their mother burn the evidence.

"*Reparo*," Percy said flatly, watching the shards of glass piece back together.

Sometimes it felt like Harry was the only person interested in him.

Percy blushed, recalling exactly *how* interested Harry was.

Percy missed him. Harry wasn't even at Hogwarts yet, he knew he would see Harry in a few days, and still he missed him.

Sighing, Percy vanished the letter. He would rather say it all in person.

The snitch flew past his window, Ginny and Charlie in hot pursuit.

He couldn't concentrate. He needed silence. Complete, utter, inviolable silence.

Not particularly caring what his mother would think, Percy got his wand out.

"You are *not* taking an occamy to the Quidditch World Cup," Sirius said, blocking the fireplace. Hester was coiled on Monty's shoulder, half asleep.

"Why not?" Monty asked.

"You can't control that thing," Sirius said. "I don't even think you should take it to Hogwarts."

"She's just a baby," Monty said. "I can't leave her on her own!"

"Occamies live for centuries," Sirius said, rubbing his face. "She's going to be *just a baby* for a while, Monty. And she wouldn't be on her own. Remus and I can take care of her."

Hester gave a sad little hiss. “She’s never been to a quidditch match before.”

“She would eat Ireland’s mascots,” Sirius said.

Monty gave him a wounded look. “She would not.”

“I repeat: *you cannot control her.*”

Monty bit the inside of his cheek. He could, sort of. She didn’t listen to him when he spoke in English, but she absolutely did when he spoke parseltongue.

“Okay,” Monty said, carefully picking Hester up. He pulled his wand out of his robes. “What if I did this?”

“Monty, don’t—”

“*Sundorcýppe!*”

There was a flash of rosy light. It washed over Hester, and to Monty it looked like nothing had happened.

Sirius gaped at him. “You cannot honestly say that an *invisible* occamy is better than a visible one!”

Monty’s jaw dropped. “It worked. It actually worked!”

But Sirius was calling for Remus as back up. Monty realized there was merit to the idea that an invisible flying serpent was, in a sense, more dangerous than a visible one.

Harry hadn’t told him the countercharm.

Monty scratched Hester’s crest. She blinked at him, once again dazzling him with her scintillating golden eyes.

“Fuck,” Monty said, just as Remus ran into the hall.

Neither Sirius nor Remus had been able to undo the spell Monty had cast. Nor had they heard of the spell, once Monty told them the incantation.

Remus had been the one to come up with a solution.

They put a bell on Hester the occamy.

Monty could still see her, a fact he did not share with Sirius and Remus. Similarly, he withheld the source of the spell. And the occamy, though it was obvious Sirius had a good

idea of who was behind the belled, flying terror

“It’s a good lesson,” Remus said when Monty was finally allowed to go to the Burrow. “Never cast a spell you can’t undo.”

“She’s too small to really hurt anyone.” Monty said, a tad hopefully.

Sirius covered his face in frustration. “Monty, she *changes size*.”

“It was worth a try,” he said, scooping up some floo powder.

Sirius sighed, then ruffled his hair. “I’ll see you at the match, kid. Don’t forget, keep your elbows tucked in!”

“I know,” Monty said, tossing the powder into the fireplace. He stepped into the green flames and called out for the Burrow.

“How’s your report on cauldron bottoms coming along?” Percy’s father asked.

Percy had been forced to set aside his report to join his family for dinner. The Burrow was bulging at the seams with the addition of Hermione and Monty, and they were having dinner outside again. It was a lovely evening, the sky a deep, velvety blue. He wished Harry was there to enjoy it with him.

“I’ll have it done by Tuesday,” he said shortly, knowing his father wasn’t actually interested in cauldron quality control. “Given everything that’s going on in the department, I need to stay on top of my own assignments. I’m not entirely sure about that new secretary Mr. Crouch has. Mr. Bagman transferred her over. Not to say it isn’t good to have more support —”

“Ludo’s the one who got our tickets,” his father said. “You know, all that business with the lawnmower.”

Percy nodded, having suspected as much. Top Box wasn’t exactly in the Weasley family budget. Neither were ten tickets, at any price point.

“That was very generous of him,” Percy said evenly. He had plenty more to say on the matter of Ludo Bagman. The man was negligent at best, when not actively dismantling his entire department. It was the *Department of Magical Games and Sports*, not the *Department of Quidditch*. The Official Gobstones Club was severely underfunded.

The conversation at the table washed over Percy as he picked at his food. Harry taking him to a supermarket had been a revelation. Percy couldn’t afford to purchase all of his food there, but some would be better than none.

He would miss his lunches with Harry.

His mother was arguing with Bill about his fang earring. Again.

“Evans has earrings,” George pointed out. Next to him Fred and Charlie were talking about the World Cup, a far less interesting subject.

“Yes, but Harry’s are tasteful,” their mother said.

“What do you think, Perce?” George asked. “Is Evans tasteful?”

“I have no opinion,” Percy said, giving his brother a hard look. He’d been ignoring the allusions Fred and George made for longer than he cared to remember. It felt like being backed into a corner.

Monty, who had been listening in on Fred and Charlie, suddenly perked up. “Harry, I mean, Evans was here?”

“For Percy’s birthday,” George said, smiling at Percy. Percy glared back.

“He’s such a lovely boy,” their mother said, turning away from a plainly relieved Bill. “After *someone* ruined Percy’s cake, he offered to buy a new one!”

“He’d make a good husband,” George said, still smiling at Percy.

Shut up, Percy mouthed, toying with his wand. If it turned into a rubber mouse, he’d throttle George with it. He couldn't believe the twins were the same age as Harry.

It was a upsetting thought, and Percy regretted having it.

“I think he’s a bit old for Ginny,” their mother said teasingly.

Ginny went beet red, her eyes darting to Monty. “Mum! Harry doesn’t even like girls!”

Percy’s mind came to a screeching halt.

Their mother’s eyebrows shot up. “Is that so?”

“*Everyone* knows he was dating Cedric Diggory last year,” Ginny said, exasperated.

“Cedric Diggory!” their mother exclaimed. “Amos’ son?”

“I hear the Slytherins call him *Gittory*,” Fred said, sharing a grin with George.

Monty and Ron started laughing, while Hermione tried to shush them. Across the table, Mafalda looked malevolent with glee.

“Language,” their mother said faintly. “Why, I never would have imagined...”

“Is there a problem, mum?” George asked pointedly

“What?” she said, her cheeks pinking. “No, of course not. Now, who wants ice cream?”

Percy stared into his bowl of strawberry ice cream. If Harry had been there, he would have eaten it for him. Fred and George would have been more tolerable. The two seemed almost afraid of Harry, which puzzled Percy as Harry was generally well-liked, and unfailingly kind.

“I hope the match *does* go on for five days,” Monty said as Percy’s mother began shooin people to bed.

“I can’t even imagine what my in-tray would look like if that happened,” Percy said. Five days? If it went past five *hours* he would leave early.

“Worried someone’ll slip dragon dung into it again?” Fred asked as they walked through the garden.

Percy pushed his glasses up. He hadn’t said anything about the dragon dung incident, but it had nevertheless crossed a line his younger brothers didn’t know existed. “I doubt that would have happened if the sender knew the recipient had a rare condition that made it more likely for him to die from diseases such as dragon pox.”

Fred’s face pinched in confusion. “What are you on about?”

Percy shook his head. He was done talking. “Ask mum.”

He didn’t bother saying *goodnight* to anyone. Percy walked straight up to his room and slammed the door shut.

Early Arrivals

Chapter Summary

August 1994

Morning of the Quidditch World Cup

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry tugged down his sleeves, feeling like a kid playing dress-up in his dad's clothes. Which he was, given he wore a suit his dad had unearthed, shrunk to fit Harry's smaller frame, and he was dressing up in the role of a muggleborn wizard dressing like a wizard attempting to dress like a muggle. Or like he was giving a viva voce.

He adjusted the tie, drawing a sigh from his dad.

"It's going to be weird no matter what," Harry said, picking up his coffee. It was late night, the evening before the Quidditch World Cup, and soon he would be greeting portkey travelers from around the world. "No one wanders a misty moor wearing a suit. Except Heathcliff."

"It *is* passé," his dad agreed. "I can assure you, none will care. If anything, you will stand out for *not* being outlandishly garbed."

Harry checked his watch. He had to meet Mr. Montgomery at the Ministry for instructions. "I know. It means more obliuations for the muggles."

Lady Madeleine jumped onto the table, which was strictly not allowed, and stared at him. Several strands of fur drifted down.

"Fine, you can come," Harry said, standing. He picked up his cat, despairing of her grey fur getting all over his clothes, and walked to the fireplace. He didn't know if half-kneazles could floo on their own, and was reluctant to chuck his cat into a fire to find out.

"Do you have everything?" his dad asked, following him into the living room. "You will be working for an extended period of time. The match may be prolonged. You must be sufficiently outfitted to survive for several days."

Harry checked his pockets. "I'm only on portkey duty. They won't have me running around enforcing the Statute of Secrecy."

His dad's lips thinned.

“And they’ll have to send me back in time for school,” Harry pointed out, taking some floo powder from the bowl on the mantel.

“Perhaps I will accompany you,” his dad said, crossing his arms. “This is a large event, a teenager should not be allowed to roam freely.”

Harry looked at him curiously. Was his dad worried about him?

“I’ll be fine,” Harry said, throwing the powder into the flames. The green light cast eerie shadows in the living room. “I won’t be *roaming* anywhere, and it’ll be packed with Ministry staff. What could possibly go wrong?”

“Is that meant to be rhetorical?” his dad asked.

Harry waved *goodbye* and stepped into the flames.

A comet shot across the sky, glimmering in green and gold. It flew low, just passing over the treetops, before fading into the mist that shrouded the moor. Lady Madeleine chased after it.

“Looks like the Irish are here first,” Slaw Cram said. He coughed wetly, wiping his mouth with a handkerchief. “They’ll get more time on the pitch.”

Harry squinted at his watch. It was midnight. The match didn’t start until dusk, and they would be receiving portkey arrivals until the last minute.

“You’ve been out here all week?” Harry asked, crossing his arms against the chill. He wished he’d brought a cloak, but it was odd enough for a teenager in a suit to be standing in a deserted moor in the middle of the night.

Mr. Craw sighed, plainly exhausted. “Half the department’s got tickets. The rest of us have to pick up the slack.”

The muggles who owned the site had a dazed look about them from repeated obliviations, and from being charmed to stay up all hours. It was all so convoluted, a clash between wanting to respect muggles and the need to keep them ignorant. Instead of sending Mr. Roberts and his family away and commandeering the area, later repaying them through some means, the Ministry had decided to keep the muggles around and routinely erase their memories. There was no way of knowing what other damage the obliviations caused. Muggles weren’t treated at St. Mungo’s, and no muggle doctor would recognize what had been done to them.

Harry checked the large gold watch he had been given. “Five...four...three...”

A group appeared in a nauseating whirl of noise and color, ripped from one location to another. They tumbled to the ground, a faded bag of Hula Hoops falling onto the wet grass.

“One past midnight, Bristly Ridge,” Harry said, walking forward to retrieve the bag. He dropped it into an empty box, the first used portkey of the night.

“Wynne-Jones,” Mr. Cram muttered, looking over the scroll he held. “Your campsite’s just over that hill. Ask for Mr. Burton.”

The Wynne-Joneses picked themselves up and limped away, and Mr. Cram made a check on his list. “Next party, Achings and Meazles from Loch Broom at six past.”

Harry nodded, keeping his eyes on the watch. “I’ve been curious, how exactly do portkeys work?”

“Bit like apparition,” Mr. Cram said. “Need a clear destination in mind. Helps to have actually been there before.” He coughed again, then gave Harry a sly look. “What trips people up is you need to think of two locations, simultaneously. Tall order. Most in the department can’t hack it. Scratch that, most can’t do it full stop.”

Harry nodded, internally seething. It was obvious, in hindsight. He checked the time again, watching the second hand tick. He had hours left of this. He wished he’d asked his dad to teach him how to apparate.

“...two...one... Six past midnight, Loch Broom.”

Monty’s jaw cracked as he yawned again, trudging down the damp lane that lead into Ottery St. Catchpole. Their destination was a dark hill on the other side of the village, where their portkey to the Quidditch World Cup awaited. He had no idea what time it was, only that it was early and he hadn’t got enough sleep. Given the pre-dawn hike, he briefly regretted not staying at Grimmauld Place.

It had been an eventful morning. Mrs. Weasley had woken them up, a big pot of porridge already made. Fred and George had been trying to smuggle something, a toffee that made your tongue grow. Mrs. Weasley made a racket summoning them all, accumulating an impressive pile. He’d seen the latest addition to the family, Mafalda, tucking a few in her pockets.

Monty shivered, wishing he’d worn a cloak. Even when they walked through the village, where it would have certainly stood out. Mr. Weasley had done a decent job of dressing as a muggle, wearing a golfing jumper that depicted a golfer post-swing exclaiming *Fore!*, and a pair of jeans several sizes too big. Maybe a muggle down on his luck. Their group was silent, too tired and too cold to make conversation.

He grimaced when he saw how steep Stoatshead Hill was. Monty stumbled and slipped his way uphill, wondering the entire time why Harry had chosen such a location. It was too dark to see the obstacle course they navigated. Sharp rocks, patches of mud and wet grass, rabbit

holes, fallen branches, trees that sprang up out of nowhere. Monty wished desperately that Mr. Weasley would use his wand to light their way, but he was committed to acting like a muggle. He could have at least brought a torch.

It was tempting to stop struggling uphill, to fall face-first in the dirt and stay there. They could drag him to the World Cup. But the ground leveled out, and Monty found himself on the summit of the hill. He looked back the way they had come, feeling a bit proud for having walked up it.

“We’ve only got ten minutes,” Mr. Weasley panted. “We just need to find the portkey.”

“How?” Monty asked, looking around. He knew portkeys were made from muggle rubbish, but didn’t know how to distinguish them from actual rubbish.

After several minutes of fruitless searching through the grass, there was a shout.

“We’ve found it!”

Monty looked up and saw, to his dismay, Cedric Diggory and a man who must have been his father.

“That explains it,” he muttered, staring at Diggory. He had no idea what had really happened between Diggory and Harry, only that it had deeply upset Harry. It was hard to tell with Harry, what he was really feeling, but his silence on the matter told Monty enough.

“Hi,” Diggory said.

Everyone returned his greeting, but Monty didn’t. He had nothing to say to Diggory. Nor did Fred and George, it seemed, who were both giving Diggory a dirty look.

Amos Diggory being overawed at the Boy Who Lived did not improve Monty’s opinion of them.

When the time came, Amos Diggory held out a filthy old boot. A horrible location, a disgusting portkey. Harry had to have known the Diggorys would be using it, which supported his theory that Diggory had said or done something to deserve such treatment.

But he did have to touch the boot, or else get left behind. Mr. Weasley kept his eyes on his watch, counting down. Suddenly, something jerked at Monty’s middle, and he was flying through some horridly loud, blindingly colorful tunnel, Hermione and Ron crashing into him from either side. He couldn’t take his finger from the boot, even if he wanted to. The only way out was through.

Monty braced himself as Harry had told him to, just before they crashed back into reality. Ron toppled over at his side, sprawled on the ground next to everyone else. Only Monty, Mr. Weasley and the Diggorys remained standing.

“Seven past five, Stoatshead Hill,” a familiar voice said.

Monty looked over and saw Harry suppressing a grin.

Ignoring the look Cedric was giving him, Harry retrieved the boot and added it to other used portkeys. He was glad Monty had landed on his feet, and was reminded of the first time he had used a portkey, to attend a Chudley Cannons game. Neither Cedric nor Amos Diggory had given him any warning.

Percy had been there.

“Morning, Basil,” Mr. Weasley said, helping little Mafalda stand up. Harry saw Fred and George giving him knowing looks; he had no idea what that was about. Perhaps he could arrange their portkey home to drop them in a pond.

“Harry?” Mr. Weasley said. “Fancy seeing you here!”

“Good morning, Mr. Weasley,” Harry replied. He checked the oversized watch he held.

“Nice suit,” Monty said, smiling at him.

Harry raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. “We’ve got another party landing in eight minutes. Please stand aside.”

He listened as Mr. Montgomery, who was inconspicuous in his kilt and poncho, directed the Diggorys and Weasleys to their campsites. Mr. Cram had been called off to help with the veela flying in. People weren’t as easily lured when the veela assumed their bird forms and began shooting fireballs, but it had still caused a commotion.

Soon the Weasleys and Diggorys were marching off across the moor. Harry knew Monty wanted to talk to him, but he pretended not to notice.

“Was that Monty Potter with Arthur?” Mr. Montgomery asked, looking at their retreating forms.

“Who?” Harry asked, checking the watch. “Four minutes.”

Mr. Montgomery muttered something about *muggleborns*, then turned back to his scroll.

Harry looked at the sky. It would be dawn soon, and he would need to sneak off to do his incantation.

“Fifteen past five, Großen Enz,” he said, as several dozen people suddenly appeared and fell to the ground. Their portkey was a rope, which was thoughtful. They had something to hold onto. Harry watched as one teenager was hauled up by an older man.

“Hey, Adrian,” Harry said, smirking at his friend. “How was Germany?”

Adrian stared at him with a blank expression. “It’s too early for this shite.”

He didn't have long to speak to Adrian. People had to be sent to their campsites, the area cleared for the next group.

"Twenty-six past five, Footdee."

Harry hadn't been responsible for any portkeys in Scotland, and was amused to see Astrid's family clutching an ancient bottle of Irn-Bru. Astrid was carrying her sleeping little sister, and thankfully landed on her feet.

"Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Urquhart," Harry said, smiling at them,

"You said you couldn't come!" Astrid hissed at him, hoisting Mhairi higher on her back.

"I said I didn't have a ticket," Harry said, looking at his watch. "Adrian's with his dad in the fourth field."

Once Astrid's family had been sent on their way, Mr. Montgomery gave him a shrewd look. "Big coincidence, your friends portkeying to this spot."

"Magic is amazing that way," Harry said, looking at the sky. It was nearly dawn. "There's ten minutes until the next group, sir. May I use the lavatory?"

The obliviation of Mr. Roberts sat uneasily with Monty. Professor Burbage often talked about how witches and wizards treated muggles, as if they were children who didn't know better, and the people with the wands knew best. The wizard, the Ministry Obliviator, had said they'd been erasing Mr. Roberts' memories ten times a day. For weeks.

It bothered him that no one else seemed bothered by it, not even Hermione. Did she think it was for their own good? Was it?

Soon, Mr. Roberts was left behind, and the cause for his repeated obliviations was made apparent. The field they walked through was crowded with tents, ranging from superficially muggle set-ups, to palatial medleys of prismatic silks, turrets, chimneys, fountains. In one case, someone had tied up albino peacocks.

Perhaps the most egregious tent, if it could even be called that, was a giant chess piece. A knight, the horse's teeth bared and glossy black. Outside, tending a potted dirigible plum shrub, was Luna.

"Good morning, Monty," she said, poking at one of the floating drupes.

"Good morning, Luna," Monty said, breaking away from the group to approach her. "How were the penguins?"

"Wet," Luna said simply, looking up at him. "What color are your dress robes?"

“What?” Monty asked dumbly. It had been a while since he had seen Luna in person.
“They’re green, why?”

Luna nodded to herself. “To match your eyes. I think mine will be silver.”

“Those are Slytherin colors,” he said, nonplussed.

Luna smiled vaguely at him. “Yes.”

“There was something I wanted to show you,” Monty said quietly, aware the others had stopped to see what the hold up was. “I couldn’t bring her, though.”

“I’ll meet her soon,” Luna said, her eyes refocusing on him. “Goodbye, Monty.”

“Goodbye, Luna,” Monty said, smiling despite himself.

She went back to her dirigible plums, and Monty went back to the Weasleys.

Harry followed close behind Mr. Montgomery, trying to keep up with the man. There had been an issue with one of the portkeys, which had activated early, resulting in several injuries. It threw everything off schedule.

As head of the Portkey Office, Mr. Montgomery was part of the retinue greeting the Bulgarian Minister, other Ministry officials, and the Bulgarian National Quidditch team. They were running late.

Unlike the rabble who were deposited on an increasingly muddy hill, the Bulgarian group was going directly to the stadium. Given the number of shamrock-covered tents, and the scarlet hue parts of the fields were taking on, it would have caused a riot to have led the team through.

The stadium was an enormous structure, eye-watering to look at as sunlight struck its golden walls. Unlike a muggle stadium, the seating began after several flights of stairs. The pitch itself was carpeted in emerald-green grass. Harry and Mr Montgomery hurried across it, to where a pavilion tent striped in gold and red waited.

Captain Lament was already inside, glowering at the butterbeers she was arranging.

“Basil, there you are!” Ludo Bagman said. Mr. Bagman was wearing his old Wimbourne Wasps robes, and had the look of someone partially transfigured into a bumblebee. He had been in conversation with Mr. Crouch and Miss Jorkins, the latter of whom was watching Captain Lament with a slightly confused expression.

“Morning, Ludo,” Mr. Montgomery said with a nod. “Barty. Time, Evans?”

Harry checked the watch he had been holding all night. It was fusing with his hand. “Three minutes.”

Mr. Montgomery looked around. “Where’s the Minister? Shouldn’t he—”

“Right, here, Basil!” Minister Fudge said, swanning into the pavilion. “Right here, and just in time! Had to settle something with the veela, excitable lot!”

Harry glanced at Captain Lament, who was vigorously setting more bottles on the table.

“Isn’t it early for butterbeer?” he asked quietly.

She smiled, a sight which, after years of conditioning, put Harry on edge.

“It is, Evans,” Captain Lament said, her voice eerily calm. “It is *much* too early for butterbeer.”

“Are you *poisoning* them?” Harry whispered, glancing at where the Minister and the others were chatting. He checked the watch again. “One minute, sir.”

“Nature will take its course,” Captain Lament said evenly, turning back to the bottles. “It will take, and take, and take...”

“Come along, Evans,” Mr. Montgomery said. Harry had no choice but to follow, and to hope Captain Lament’s grudge against all things quidditch would not end in mass murder. He’d already exonerated one alleged mass murderer that year. Two was asking too much of him.

Back on the pitch, not much had changed. It was bright and chilly, and Harry was now part of the rarefied group who got to trod on the Quidditch World Cup pitch.

“Evans?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said. “Fifteen seconds.”

He noticed, then, that the Minister was giving him a funny look. Harry doubted the Minister remembered him, or Buckbeak. The hippogriff had been folded back into the Hogwarts flock, just another hippogriff.

“Three,” he counted. “Two...”

The first to arrive was Minister Oblansk. He was an older man, with greying hair and thick glasses. His robes were black velvet, trimmed in gold, a stark contrast to the deranged muggle clothing the British group wore.

“Welcome!” Minister Fudge began, spreading his arms wide. His purple pinstripe suit clashed magnificently with Mr. Bagman’s black and yellow robes.

Minister Oblansk gave him a blank look.

Mr. Crouch cleared his throat. “*Dobre doshŭl, Ministŭr Oblansk.*”

The Bulgarian Minister smiled. “*Dobre zavaril.*”

Harry moved forward to retrieve the portkey, an empty yogurt cup.

Several more members of the Bulgarian Ministry arrived, with Mr. Crouch translating. Minister Fudge was doing his best to help by speaking very slowly, very loudly, and flapping his arms around in a bizarre pantomime. What he was attempting to communicate, Harry had no idea, but Minister Oblansk was nodding encouragingly.

“One minute,” Harry said, now holding several pieces of trash.

“Not a fan of quidditch, Evans?” Mr. Montgomery asked, his gaze fixed on the golden hoops that rose above them.

“Why do you say that, sir?” Harry asked. “Thirty seconds.”

“Most people would be excited to see the most famous seeker in the world,” Mr. Montgomery said.

The Bulgarian team appeared as one, landing easily on the pitch as if they had been there the whole time. Harry knew them all by sight, weeks of coverage in the *Daily Prophet* made that inevitable. Viktor Krum was in the lead, a hatchet-faced, scrawny teenager with a dour mien. He was the youngest professional seeker, the ace of the Bulgarian team.

“Most famous?” Harry said, putting the watch away. “That’s debatable.”

Lister: Yo, matey! Excuse me! Excuse me!

Van Driver: Nodrap?

Lister: No, I don't speak any Bulgarian. You speak English?

Van Driver: Snairaglub uoy era — Hsilgne M'i, Yrros?

-Red Dwarf, S3E1, “Backwards”

Flying Carpet Embargo

Chapter Summary

August 1994

Afternoon of the Quidditch World Cup

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

For a moment, he thought he was going to die. He forced himself through a space too small, a space that did not truly exist, an eternal, choking passage of nothingness. Then he was released, a subtle *pop* like a cracked knuckle the only indication Percy had apparated. He held his wand in one hand to help direct his transit, and a small photograph of the clearing itself for his thoughts and magic to focus on. Bill and Charlie appeared nearby, Charlie so loud it echoed through the woods. He made a self-effacing grin, Bill sharing his amusement.

Percy tucked the picture into a pocket. He didn't know much about muggle camping, nor magical camping for that matter, and hadn't been entirely sure how to dress. His younger siblings emulated muggle teenagers, taking cues from the muggleborn students they knew, wearing jeans or shorts and t-shirts. Hermione, who had let everyone know she had gone camping with her parents, made no objection to this.

Percy, however, was a Ministry employee, attending an international event. He had to dress the part. Forest green moleskin trousers, a plain button down shirt, and a stormy grey sport coat. He slid his wand into his coat; he had spent an excessive amount of time adding a pocket specifically for it. Bill and Charlie wore their work clothes, which were muggle adjacent; robes weren't the best idea when one handled massive, fire-breathing lizards. The fewer ways a dragon could grab you, the better.

They couldn't linger in the clearing, given others were apparating in. Percy led the way through the woods, hoping the motion would keep him alert. Despite his mother's best intentions, his *bit of a lie-in* had ended as soon as she began shouting at Fred and George. It had been a struggle to get back to sleep after that. Percy wasn't entirely sure if, absent that, he *would* have been able to sleep longer. The cauldron report had been preying on his mind, and if he wasn't working it he could feel himself slipping behind.

The cauldron report, and Harry.

Bill and Charlie chatted amicably while they walked. They had always been closer to each other than to their younger siblings. They had been the first to go to Hogwarts, just one year apart. By the time Percy had started, Bill was already a prefect and Charlie had been made seeker. Fred and George had always been attached at the hip, and Ron and Ginny were a year

apart like Bill and Charlie. Percy was the odd one out. Too young for his older brothers, too old for his younger brothers and sister.

It was not something Percy dwelt on, not anymore.

The walk out of the woods was short, made easy by a trail cutting a straight path through the trees, lined with unlit lanterns. Bill and Charlie were unconcerned with locating their father—worst case, they would meet the rest of their family at the stadium—so finding his father became yet another thing for Percy to worry about.

There was a stroke of good fortune when, just past the tree line, Percy spotted a group of red-headed individuals. As he neared, he saw they had built a fire. A muggle fire, based on the number of discarded matches on the ground. His father was cooking sausages and eggs over it.

The muggle way.

Percy stopped walking.

So they could have done it, if they ever bothered to try. Of course his father would, if to indulge his obsession with all things muggle. Such fascinating creatures, muggles. His father could put on muggle clothes, play with muggle money, be a muggle for a day, pretend that any of this was remotely similar to an actual muggle's experience. He would stick a conjured toasting fork through a sausage and hold it over a nonmagical fire. But when it came to what Percy wanted, what Percy *needed*, it was evidently not worth the trouble.

“Just in time, boys!” his father said, finally noticing them. He had a moronic look on his face.

Percy forced himself to move, hoping no one caught his hesitation. “Good afternoon. We just apparated in.”

He looked around. There were the two tents his father had borrowed from his coworker Perkins. Ron was staring at the pan of eggs, talking with Hermione and Monty. Ginny and Mafalda were people-watching while Ginny talked about the upcoming match. Fred and George were watching him, which was never a good sign.

“How was your walk?” Percy asked casually, sitting next to the twins. He had to keep an eye on them.

“It was grand,” Fred said airily, sharing a look with George.

“Evans was our portkey operator,” George said.

“Given the size of the Portkey Office, that is unsurprising,” Percy said. He didn't look at the fire, at the food being cooked, but he could hear it. The sizzle of frying eggs, the *snap* of a sausage bursting its casing. He could smell it. It made his stomach churn.

Fred leaned towards him, his voice dropping to a whisper. “We asked mum about that thing you said.”

Percy shook his head. "I don't wish to discuss that."

"Neither did she," George said. "She said it was none of our business, and it was sorted."

Percy made a strange sound, something between a scoff and a laugh. Disbelief.

"It is not sorted," Percy said harshly. "It's something I have to live with. It doesn't go away simply because she can't see it and doesn't have to deal with it."

"But what is it?" Fred asked insistently. For a moment, Percy considered that Fred and George were genuinely concerned, that this wasn't them being meddlesome and nosy. It was his own fault for enabling this line of questioning. Maybe he would be exempted from pranking that put his life at risk.

What if word of his disease got around the Ministry? That Percy Weasley was defective, *magically* defective?

Could he trust Fred and George?

He didn't respond to Fred's question. He didn't know how. The silence that grew between them was interrupted by plates of eggs and sausages. Percy took a plate from his father, who smiled at him. Percy gave him a blank look back. He was not hungry.

He had to eat. The match didn't start for hours yet, and he hadn't brought any of his own food.

Percy picked at the food, dragging it out. The eggs were from hens raised at the Burrow. The sausage was from a pig raised at the Burrow. He had no way of measuring the difference between his father's first attempt at muggle cooking and his mother's magical methods.

His musings were interrupted by the arrival of Ludo Bagman.

For a moment, Percy stared at Bagman. The man was dressed in full quidditch robes, bright yellow and black stripes, a large and angry wasp emblazoned on the chest, standing out like a flare.

Percy had reconciled his attendance at the Quidditch World Cup as a networking opportunity. He had already met Bagman, however, and wasn't impressed with the man. He was the head of the most lucrative department in the Ministry, and was appallingly careless with that responsibility.

As Bagman rambled about the upcoming match, apparently having nothing whatsoever to do and no one holding him to any kind of expectation, several tents burst into vibrant purple flames, sending the Ministry staff who were attentive in their duties into a frenzy. Percy watched them race past.

"We'll bet thirty-seven galleons, fifteen sickles, three knuts."

His head whipped around to see Fred and George giving Ludo Bagman all of their savings. Their father stood there and let it happen.

Percy opened his mouth to object, then closed it again. Fred and George were the type who had to learn their lessons the hard way. After all the trouble they'd given him as prefect, as their brother, losing money was the least of what they deserved.

He looked at his father, standing helplessly as if there was nothing he could do to stop Fred and George, and he felt disgust.

Percy set his plate down. He didn't want to be there. He wanted to go home and work. Or not home, go to work and work.

He wanted to see Harry. He needed to talk to someone who wasn't a complete idiot.

Bagman sat down for a cup of tea, on the lookout for Mr. Crouch. He needed help communicating with his Bulgarian counterpart. Another situation in which Harry would be beneficial. Not that Percy wanted him—liked him for his usefulness.

"Barty speaks about a hundred and fifty languages," Bagman said. "He'll be able to sort it out."

"Mr. Crouch speaks over two hundred languages," Percy corrected. "Mermish, Gobbledegook, Troll—"

"Anyone can speak troll," Fred interrupted. "All you have to do is point and grunt."

Percy's expression hardened. "Do you have any idea how ignorant you sound? No, don't bother answering."

"It's true," Ron said offhandedly.

"It is *not*," Percy said, turning to his youngest brother. "Your first mistake is in assuming all trolls are identical. As if mountain trolls in Peru speak the same language as the forest trolls here! It's as stupid as assuming all humans speak the same language. It's completely dismissive of how rich and varied troll culture—"

A *crack* interrupted him. Someone had apparated to their fireside.

It was Mr. Crouch.

Mr. Crouch was dressed in a muggle suit, as crisply pressed as his typical robes. Percy, who had been feeling slightly overdressed, suddenly wished he had worn a tie.

Mr. Crouch and Bagman discussed the translation issue—the Bulgarians wanted more seats added to the Top Box, another thing which made Percy think of Harry.

"It didn't cost him anything to give your dad those tickets. He can add as many seats as he wants. It's magic."

Percy sighed, then asked, "Would you like a cup of tea, Mr. Crouch?"

Mr. Crouch looked startled by the reminder other people existed. “Yes. Thank you, Weatherby.”

Fred and George’s spluttered, but theirs wasn’t the only reaction. Everyone had heard it. His father, Arthur Weasley, was sitting right across from him. He was surrounded by Weasleys. Percy could not comprehend Mr. Crouch’s inability to call him the correct name, after having worked with him for nearly three months.

“It’s Weasley, Mr. Crouch,” Percy said firmly. He gestured to his father. “Arthur Weasley is my father. We have the same surname.”

Mr. Crouch stared at him for a moment. “Right. Weasley. Thank you. Which reminds me,” Mr. Crouch said, turning to Percy’s father. “Ali Bashir wants a word about the flying carpet embargo.”

Percy stoked the fire under the kettle.

His father sighed wearily. “I don’t know how many owls I’ve sent him. Carpets are muggle artifacts, as defined in the Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects.”

“You’re the one who added them,” Percy muttered, stabbing the fire more vigorously. No one heard him. Not that they ever listened.

“He’s desperate to export here,” Mr. Crouch said. Percy handed the man a cup of tea.

“They’ll never replace brooms in Britain,” Bagman said happily, like the muppet he was.

Percy cleared his throat. “The embargo infringes upon a witch or wizard’s right to travel.”

“Percy?” his father asked, giving him a concerned look.

“We wouldn’t need so many portkeys,” Percy said, “nor rely on unknown substances such a floo powder for mass transit, if we had adequate alternatives.”

Mr. Crouch raised his eyebrows. “Perhaps. My grandfather had an Axminster...”

Percy released a breath. How was he going to change the Ministry if he only said what people wanted to hear?

Before the conversation moved on, they were interrupted by a loud rumble from above. Percy looked at the clear blue sky. He pushed up his glasses, and saw a dark speck approaching them.

It took a moment for him to recognize what the noise was. It was the sound of an engine.

Monty leapt to his feet and smiled, pointing at the flying motorbike headed right for them. “It’s Sirius!”

“Ludo,” Mr. Crouch said quickly. “We need to meet the Bulgarians.” He apparated before Bagman could respond.

Percy looked at the approaching motorbike again, narrowing his eyes in thought. He did not like the conclusion he had just come to about his boss.

Monty had been half-listening to the conversation as he ate his sausage and eggs. He didn't know Percy that well, and didn't know much about him. He was Ron's older brother, he had been a prefect and then Head Boy, he was good at school. It stood out to him that Harry had gone to Percy's birthday dinner. And *that* reminded him of when they had gone to Diagon Alley the year before. How Harry had taken Percy to a cafe.

He didn't have much time to think about it, as Sirius had just landed next to the tents. Monty hurried over to him, and was only slightly embarrassed that Sirius hugged him in front of everyone.

"I missed you too, kid," Sirius said, ruffling his hair. "How was the portkey?"

"It was awful," Monty said. "But also fun? I saw Harry, he was waiting for us."

Sirius chuckled. "Color me surprised." He looked up, his expression growing strained. Monty turned around, belatedly realizing that seeing Sirius Black in person tended to instill terror.

Bagman apparated straight away, without a word. Mr. Weasley was standing up, and cautiously approached. Ron was white as a sheet, and Hermione had a shaky smile. Percy, who had very recently become a person of interest to Monty, poured another cup of tea.

"Hello," Sirius said to everyone, leaving an arm around Monty's shoulders. "I'm Sirius Black, Monty's godfather."

Hermione was the first to speak. "Nice to see you again, Mr. Black."

Sirius smiled at her, then turned to Ron, who flinched back. "Sorry about giving you a scare. I was looking for something."

"With a knife?" Ron managed to say.

Sirius shrugged.

"No hard feelings," Mr. Weasley said, smiling nervously. "Honestly, we should be thanking you."

"Thank him?" Ron exclaimed.

Percy cleared his throat. "Would you like a cup of tea, Mr. Black?"

"Why not?" Sirius said, accepting the cup Percy offered. "Cheers."

It was awkward, and it seemed the only one who wasn't scared of Sirius was Percy for whatever reason, but soon everyone was introduced and the excitement for the match ramped back up.

"Have you had a chance to go around to the vendors?" Sirius asked, taking another cup of tea from Percy.

"Not yet," Monty said eagerly, affected by the growing tension in the air.

"I can walk around with the kids," Sirius said to Mr. Weasley. "Keep them out of trouble."

Mr. Weasley, who had gradually relaxed, laughed at that. "Good luck. I've been trying for over twenty years."

Monty set off with Sirius, along with Hermione and a slightly less nervous Ron. They had arrived early in the morning, and Monty hadn't noticed how packed it had become in the hours since. There were people everywhere, witches and wizards, goblins and house-elves. Magic was in the air, in the wondrous tents that defied logic, people flying on brooms overhead, salesmen apparating among the throngs. Towering displays of luminous rosettes, pins that cried out the names of players, oversized shamrocks dancing on tall green hats, scarves, flags that sang national anthems, figurines, models of brooms, collectible cards. To his amusement, Monty spotted themed gobstones sets.

Ron, who had been saving his pocket money, tried to buy a shamrock hat for himself. Sirius stopped him, insistent that he owed Ron, and purchased it for him. Sirius even bought them all omnioculars.

"Thank you," Monty said as he tried to decipher what all the dials did.

"Don't mention it," Sirius said. "I have vaults filled with galleons and nothing to spend it on."

Monty nodded absently. He knew what that was like, the only thing left of your family a Gringotts vault. He wasn't sure if Sirius missed his family, though. He never spoke of them, and Monty *had* met Mrs. Black's portrait.

"I inherited everything," Sirius said, his eyes growing distant. "Except the one thing I'd actually want. Now that I'm old enough to care, that is."

Monty frowned. "Your Wizengamot seat?"

Sirius gave him a wry smile. "Got it in one."

Percy sighed at yet another explosion. No one was even pretending to adhere to the Statute of Secrecy, and there weren't enough Ministry employees working to keep a hundred thousand

people in check. Seeing so many people made Percy realize how small the British magical community was.

He found it interesting that his father had banned flying carpets, but had nothing to say about Sirius Black's charmed motorbike. Carpets were not the exclusive domain of muggles, but motor vehicles certainly were. And yet, the Knight Bus was allowed to operate, and the Ford Anglia existed.

Their group had disbanded to purchase quidditch merchandise, save Fred and George who had given all their money to Bagman. And Percy himself, who had no interest in it. The twins, who had been huddled together, whispering to each other, joined Percy at the fire.

"If I tell you," Percy said, staring into the flames. "You have to swear to not tell anyone else."

"We solemnly swear," the twins said immediately. Percy frowned at the strange phrasing, and at how serious they sounded.

"We haven't told anyone about you fancying a certain Slytherin," Fred said.

"We know how to keep secrets," George added.

Percy shook his head. He wasn't going to talk to his brothers about Harry. "I have a disease."

The twins were silent.

He sighed, and continued. "It's difficult to explain if you have no grounding in magical theory. Basically, my body cannot handle too much external magic. I have to take a very rare, and very expensive, medication."

George cleared his throat. "We...didn't know that."

"I know," Percy said flatly. "And now you do."

"Perce," Fred began, "we wouldn't...if we knew..."

"Are you going to die?" George asked.

"How serious is it?" Fred asked.

"If I'm not careful, I could die," Percy admitted. "With what I eat, with any potions I take."

"Is that why you never eat breakfast?" George asked.

"What medication?" Fred asked. "How much does it cost?"

There was a muffled *meow*, and Lady Madeleine walked into the firelight. Fred and George's questions stopped as they all stared at the half-kneazle.

She had caught a leprechaun.

"Is that Evans' cat?" Fred asked quietly, looking unnerved.

“I don’t know if that’s good luck or bad luck,” George said, scooting away.

Lady Madeleine walked right up to Percy and dropped the leprechaun at his feet. The leprechaun, who had been playing dead, immediately ran away. Lady Madeleine, in an uncatlike manner, didn’t give chase. It was then Percy saw a scroll had been tied to her neck. He reached out to untie it.

“What’s it say?” Fred asked, leaning over.

Percy shoved the scroll into his coat. “What does what say?”

“Dad says you’ve made a friend at work,” George said, glancing from Lady Madeleine to Percy. “Someone you have lunch with.”

“Someone who’s a muggleborn,” Fred said, exchanging a look with George.

Percy stood up. “If you would excuse me, I must visit the garderobe.” He began walking away, not caring where he ended up. Why couldn’t the twins pick a more interesting topic than his personal life? The flying carpet embargo, for example.

“What the fuck is a garderobe?” he heard George say.

“Do you think Evans is really making him lunch?” Fred said. “*Evans?*”

Percy walked into the woods, into the safety of the trees. The lanterns were now lit, and people were moving towards the stadium to get a head start.

He stepped off the path and found a tree to stand under. Something brushed against his legs, and he found that Lady Madeleine had followed him.

It took several breaths for Percy to calm down. He had said a lot of things to Harry, but had not directly confronted what lay between them. He didn’t know if he was ready. He didn’t know if he could.

Percy took the scroll from his pocket and unrolled it.

Can we meet here after the game?

He closed his eyes and leaned against the tree. It was worse than *after sunset*. How would Harry know where *here* was? Or when the game would end?

Percy looked down at the cat again, who was watching him expectantly. She would know the location, at least.

“Tell him I said *yes*.”

Chapter End Notes

Autocorrections of "Mr Crouch" :

Mr Crotch

Mr Crunch

In Good Conscience

Chapter Summary

August 1994

Quidditch World Cup - game time

“Meow.”

“Okay, but what did he sound like when he said it?”

Lady Madeleine licked her paw, then began cleaning an ear.

Harry nudged her slightly with his foot, and she glared at him.

“This is going to bother me forever,” Harry said. “For eternity.”

“Meow!”

Harry rolled his eyes, then checked the golden watch he held. He’d been left on his own since midafternoon, as the activity in the campsites began to escalate. The muggles who owned the land had been charmed into their homes. Trying to obliviate the madness that swept through the moor would have killed them.

Since he was alone, he’d been able to perform his animagus incantation between portkeys. Now, as dusk fell, there was only one group left.

“Thirteen past eight, Portage and Main,” he said, just as two women appeared. “Welcome to the Quidditch World Cup,” he continued, checking the parchment listing the campers.

“Ltikine...”

Harry did a double take, then looked up at a tall woman with a silver tracery of scars on her face. She had golden eyes, and was watching him expectantly.

“Your campsite’s just over that ridge,” Harry said in a completely normal voice. “The site manager is Mr. Howell.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking the hand of the woman next to her.

“Enjoy the match,” Harry said faintly. He had no idea what their portkey had been. He’d retrieve it after recovering from his shock. “I love your work, by the way.”

The woman, the author of his favorite prairie werewolf romance novel, winked at him.

Harry watched the couple walk towards the ridge, still starstruck.

“I should have asked for an autograph,” he said faintly.

“Meow.”

Shaking his head, Harry picked up their portkey. It was a sticky plastic cup with a domed lid.

“What the hell is a Slurpee?”

Lady Madeleine, being one year old and a cat, did not know. The question soon left Harry’s mind as a gong resounded across the moor. He dropped the plastic cup into the used portkey box, then turned to see the woods light up in red and green, forming a path to the golden stadium that sat on the horizon.

“Alright,” Harry said, tossing the golden watch and roll of parchment on top of the used portkeys. “Time to wait.”

Percy walked alongside his smiling family, not feeling particularly jocular. Not that he ever did, but his reticence stood out among the singing and laughing quidditch fans. He tried to appreciate that he was experiencing an important cultural moment. The Quidditch World Cup hadn’t been held in Britain for thirty years. His mother had described it as a *once-in-a-lifetime opportunity* when reaching out to Hermione’s parents.

There were other such opportunities Percy would have preferred to explore.

It wasn’t a long walk to the stadium, but his discomfort made the time drag. The air was too still, the press of so many people too confining. His family was too loud. He was too tired, too hungry, and already dreading how bored he would be by the game. Quidditch was quidditch was quidditch. A bunch of twats on brooms.

Percy smiled to himself. He could imagine Harry saying that exact thing. He almost envied that Harry had to work instead of attending the game, not that Harry would have willingly attended otherwise. Percy never had to pretend to like quidditch when he was with Harry. He didn’t have to pretend anything at all, save one thing. It had almost killed him.

The stadium was impressive to behold. It was one of the largest structures he had ever seen, ostentatiously gold, swarmed with people. He heard his father explaining how much work had gone into it, making the structure undetectable to muggles. A yearlong project, a task force of five hundred.

Had they put the same effort into securing the surrounding area, they wouldn’t have needed a team of Obliviators.

There was something of a commotion when Neville Longbottom and his grandmother joined Monty and Sirius Black. It was revealed they also had Top Box tickets. Monty had neglected to share that information with Ron, which Percy thought was a reasonable way to deal with his younger brother. Ron's jealousy had grated Percy's nerves for years.

The Top Box was, unsurprisingly, at the top of the stadium. Percy paused halfway up, feeling lightheaded. Fred and George noticed immediately and stopped too, both looking concerned. Percy closed his eyes, willing away his frustration.

"I'm fine," he said to them. He'd only had half a sausage and a fried egg to eat all day. "I just need something to eat."

It was stupid and careless of him to be unprepared to deal with his own symptoms. It was no one's fault but his own.

Fred and George immediately began searching their pockets. Percy watched them pull out a few toffees their mother hadn't found.

"I'm fine," Percy repeated.

"No, I've got something," Fred said hastily, thrusting a half-eaten bar of Honeydukes chocolate at him. "I was saving it for later."

Percy shuffled to one side, accepting the chocolate. He couldn't recall the twins sharing any of their food with him before, not that he would have asked.

"I can't have much of this," he said, breaking off a square that didn't have teeth marks. "Thank you."

Fred smiled at him. "Any time."

"Should've told us ages ago," George muttered, shaking his head.

"There was no incentive to," Percy said, handing the remaining chocolate back to Fred. He hoped they let it drop. He didn't want to deal with it.

The twins, thankfully, didn't push. Instead, they were hovering, which would tip everyone else off that something was going on. Percy didn't need or want to be treated like glass. Even if he had almost fainted at the Quidditch World Cup.

He made it to the Top Box in one piece, shooing Fred and George away. Looking around, Percy had to admit it was a spectacular view. The top of the stadium, halfway between the goalposts, two dozen seats upholstered in royal purple. The Weasley party took the front row, while Monty and the others were seated in the second. There was a house-elf already in the second row, covering her eyes.

"Is this seat reserved?" Black asked her.

"Winky is saving the seat for her master, sir," the house-elf said in a shaky voice.

“Who’s your master?”

“Mr. Crouch, sir,” Winky said.

“That’s going to be a *no* for me,” Black said, abandoning their assigned seats to join the Weasleys in the front row. “Starting to make more sense now.”

“What is?” Monty asked, also climbing over the seats. Neville began to as well, but his grandmother seized him and had them walk around.

“Optics,” Black said, a dark look crossing his face. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s just enjoy the game.”

Percy sat near the end of the row, between his father and Charlie, ignoring the looks Fred and George kept sending him. This was the part he had been looking forward to, meeting the important people. It was a shame Bagman hadn’t capitulated and added twelve more seats.

Was Harry watching the game?

Percy took a moment to collect himself. Fred’s chocolate helped, but it took time for it to work. He was still hungry, still shaky. They were at a dizzying height. He closed his eyes so he didn’t have to take it all in. He just needed a moment.

“You’re not afraid of heights, are you, Perce?” Charlie asked.

Percy opened his eyes to give his brother an unamused look. “No, Charles, I am not afraid of heights.”

He closed his eyes again, listening to Ron make some off-color comments about house-elves in the vicinity of a house-elf, the kids playing with their omnioculars, Hermione reading the program.

Then the box began to fill. His father shook hands with each new addition, and Percy worked in his introduction. Black was reading his own program, rebelling against whatever plan the Minister had for inviting him. Mrs. Longbottom was too busy fussing over Neville to pay attention.

Percy did experience some panic when the Minister for Magic arrived.

“I remember you,” Minister Fudge said, once he was done speaking with Percy’s father. “Percival Septimus Weasley. You’re Muriel’s nephew, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” Percy said, surprised the Minister had remembered. Surprised that the Minister had connected him to his aunt.

“Is he your son, Arthur?” the Minister asked.

“He is,” his father said, smiling proudly. “He just started working for Magical Cooperation this summer.”

The Minister nodded. “Good, good. Percival here once made a very convincing argument about a hippogriff! Can you imagine?”

Percy hoped he was no longer shaking. It wasn’t exactly a pleasant memory for the Minister, he was certain. And the Minister wasn’t done with him. He was introduced to the Bulgarian Minister, who supposedly didn’t speak English. Given how attentive Minister Oblansk was to the conversation, Percy doubted that.

He wasn’t in the spotlight for long. The more interesting attraction was Monty Potter, who looked flummoxed by the Minister for Magic speaking to him. Black put on a good show, thanking Minister Fudge for the tickets, while partially shielding Monty behind him.

Things got worse when the Malfoys arrived. Lucius Malfoy had made a donation to St. Mungo’s, no doubt restitution for whoever he’d put in there during the war. The inclusion of the Malfoys made Percy question the Minister’s competence, given what Sirius Black’s response was.

“Cissy,” he said, smiling broadly. “Fancy running into you here.”

Narcissa Malfoy froze, one hand clawing her son’s shoulder.

“Bella says *hi*,” Black said, still smiling. “Actually, what she said was *die, filthy blood traitor*, but it’s the thought that counts.”

Their section of the Top Box went quiet. Black put his hands in his pockets, eagerly waiting for their response. He looked like he had plenty to say. Twelve years worth of it, subjected to Azkaban without a trial, while a man like Lucius Malfoy got to walk free.

Lucius Malfoy gripped his cane, and opened his mouth to respond, but Ludo Bagman burst in.

Percy closed his eyes again. Everything seemed to be annoying him. He knew he was having a bad day. If the match went on too long, he would just leave. Find Harry, wherever he was, then leave. He took steady breaths, trying to calm his mind.

Bagman’s voice boomed through the stadium. He was in his element, in the center of attention. The opening remarks were blessedly brief. The sooner the game started, the sooner it would end.

“...allow me to introduce the Bulgarian Team Mascots!”

Percy huffed, wishing Harry was there to discuss the ethics of using so-called creatures as mascots. Then he heard something that made his blood run cold.

“Ooh,” his father said. “Veela!”

“They couldn’t have brought lamia?” Percy muttered, watching the ethereal women move across the pitch. There were at least a hundred of them, their pale limbs flashing in the stadium lights as they danced to bewitching music. Percy didn’t dare look around to see how others were being affected. He could hear it well enough.

“Right?” Charlie said quietly.

Percy jerked, then turned to look at Charlie. Charlie had made it clear to their mother that he had no interest in romance. Percy envied how easily he evaded her expectations.

“Don’t tell mum,” Percy whispered, wrapping his arms around himself. Why did it have to be veela?

Charlie’s face tightened with concern. “It’s not my business to tell,” he said. “But, Percy—”

“And now, put your wands in the air for the Irish Team Mascots!”

Whatever Charlie wanted to say was lost in the ensuing frenzy. It was almost worse than the veela as people fought over the gold conjured for the leprechauns’ aerial display.

Percy shook his head as his younger siblings shoved the fake gold into their pockets.

“Ron,” Monty said. “It’s not even real...”

“I’m writing to the Board of Governors,” Percy loudly decided, noting that even Bagman was loading up on the leprechaun gold. “A Hogwarts education isn’t what it used to be.”

Harry sat on a hill, watching the stadium from afar. Lady Madeleine slept on his lap, exhausted from a long day of hunting leprechauns and other small game.

“I should’ve brought a book,” he said aloud. One of her ears twitched, but she didn’t wake up.

He liked the moor. The wind had finally picked up, carrying the scents from the campsite away. It was quiet, desolate if one ignored the thousands of tents and giant, golden stadium.

Harry leaned back to look at the sky. It was one of his favorite things about Hogwarts, how he could actually see the stars. It seemed so much bigger here, sitting alone in the dark in some isolated moor. It was overwhelming.

“Ireland wins!”

Harry wrinkled his nose, then checked his watch.

“Krum gets the snitch, but Ireland wins!”

He stood, and Lady Madeleine meowed in annoyance.

“It hasn’t been half an hour,” Harry said, tapping his watch in case a dial was stuck. He picked Lady Madeleine up and began walking towards the stadium. “All of this for a half

hour of entertainment. Bullshit.”

As soon as the Bulgarian seeker had caught the snitch, Percy had got out of his seat. The game was over, Ireland had won, and the twins hadn't lost all of their money. All before bedtime, which was the best Percy could have hoped for.

Before he could make his escape, Charlie seized him by the neck and swung him around. Ireland's national anthem played at a deafening volume, and referees were blasting their way through leprechauns and veela to get to the injured players.

“...ditch World Cup itself is brought to the Top Box!”

Percy pulled himself out of Charlie's clutches, no mean feat given his brother wrestled dragons for a living. Any chance he had of meeting Harry early was gone. Light filled the Top Box, illuminating them for the entire stadium to see. Percy straightened his coat, and hoped his hair was in some kind of order. He reached for his wand, whispering a charm to stop up his ears. He had learned it ages ago, but it resulted in not hearing anyone approaching his room.

He clapped politely as the Irish team received the Cup. He supposed it was an impressive game, given the skill both teams demonstrated. Once the teams were gone again, the twins collected their winnings from Bagman.

Getting out of the stadium was a slow process. People who had been drunk earlier in the day were near catatonic. He could see people talking about the game, which was all people would be doing for weeks yet. At least until the Triwizard Tournament was announced. There wasn't much time left. He had to get the cauldron report done.

He watched Neville and his grandmother peel off, then Sirius Black climbed onto his motorbike and roared into the night sky.

Percy performed the countercharm once inside the tent, and regretted it immediately. It was no quieter than in the stadium, and his ears were ringing. It was going to go on all night.

“I suppose we can have one last cup of cocoa,” his father was saying. “Just the one, then it's off to bed.”

He was installed at a table, and given a cup of cocoa. Percy sipped at it, glad the twins had left off observing him to talk about the game. He pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time. He took another sip.

“Are you certain you didn’t leave it at home?” Mrs. Longbottom asked Neville.

Neville shook his head, his face red. He looked on the verge of tears.

Mrs. Longbottom pursed her lips. “*Accio* Neville’s wand!”

They waited, Harry discreetly waiting with them. A minute passed, then another. The wand never appeared.

“We will check at home,” Mrs. Longbottom said. “If it’s not there, I’m sure it will turn up! Good thing you didn’t bring your father’s... Now, come along. I’m tired and we still need to apparate.”

Neville was marched towards the apparition clearing, wiping his eyes. Harry leaned against his tree again.

“Do you think you could find it?” he asked Lady Madeleine.

She blinked at him, then darted into the trees.

Harry put his hand in his pockets. He knew Percy might not be able to meet immediately after the game, so he didn’t mind waiting. He trusted Percy would show up. He had said *yes*.

He knew his friends would be thrilled with the outcome. Even Terence, who had spoken highly of Krum, could acknowledge Ireland as the better overall team.

Harry groaned in frustration. He didn't want to think about quidditch. He wanted to come up with the perfect thing to say to change Percy’s mind.

Percy got his chance when Ginny fell asleep and spilled cocoa on the already sleeping Mafalda. Once the girls were cleaned up, they were all sent to bed.

As he was walking away from the tents, having given Bill and Charlie the slip, Percy wondered why he, as an ostensible adult, was being given a bedtime by his father.

Percy pulled out his watch. Grimacing, he lengthened his stride, glad the ongoing festivities had centered around the violently green tents in another field.

He slowed when he reached the trees, brushing his coat down. It had only been a few days since he had last seen Harry. There was nothing to be nervous about.

Percy’s heart was still racing when he found him.

It was dark in the woods, and quiet. The moon had begun to set, and its faint light shone through the leaves, illuminating Harry. He leaned against a tree, his eyes closed, hair brushed

to one side and falling artfully across his face. Percy had never seen him in a suit before, had never even imagined it. It made Harry look older, somber.

Harry opened his eyes and looked directly at him.

“You’re right on time,” he said, smiling faintly.

Percy swallowed, then walked up to Harry. Harry watched him with dark, expectant eyes.

“Harry,” he said. Then, louder, “We need to—”

Harry grabbed his lapels and pulled Percy into a soft kiss. Harry briefly released him, reaching up to cradle his face instead, to twist fingers through his hair. Percy closed his eyes tight, feeling a heaviness in his chest. He felt so incredibly sad. He wrapped his arms around Harry, pulling him close as Harry brushed his tears away.

“I’m sorry,” Percy whispered, finally working up the nerve to touch Harry’s face, trace his lips, to feel if his hair was as soft as he dreamed.

Harry smiled as he kissed him back. “Summer’s almost over.”

Percy nodded, pulling away so he could look into Harry’s eyes. “I’ll write to you.”

“If anyone asks,” Harry said, a mischievous gleam in his eyes, “I’ll say all the owls are from my boyfriend.”

Percy knew he was blushing. He could see Harry’s eyes widen, his nervous swallow, Harry’s fingers tracing the tips of his ears.

“Harry...”

“I think you’re really cute, you know,” Harry said idly. “Among other things. Have I mentioned how much I like you?”

Percy closed his eyes, pulling Harry closer to him. “I...care for you.”

He could feel Harry’s laughter. “You sound like...someone I know. Who is named Percy Weasley.”

Percy steeled himself, then said, “I cannot, in good conscience, enter a relationship at this moment in time.”

Harry’s fingers trailed down his throat, and Percy shivered. Harry sighed, then kissed Percy so gently he thought his heart would break.

“And I don’t want to be someone’s secret,” Harry said.

“That’s not—”

An explosion shattered the night. They looked at each other, wide eyed, as the screaming began.

Splined

Chapter Summary

August 1994

Quidditch World Cup - Post-match

Between one breath and the next, his mind emptied. His racing heart, feelings that were becoming harder to contain, his incipient panic, the bone-deep terror he felt at his brother's life being at risk, all froze and broke away in the icy clarity that consumed his thoughts.

At the first explosion, he took out his wand. Percy was agonizingly close, his lips parted temptingly, forming words in protest at something Harry had said. His face drained of color, his eyes blown wide in surprise, and he began to turn towards the screaming.

Harry held fast to him.

"We are not running back," he said evenly.

Percy flinched, then glared at Harry.

"You are not suggesting we stay here?" Percy asked, his body tensing.

"No," Harry said. "I am suggesting you apparate us."

Percy's expression relaxed, and he nodded. He took Harry's hand, an act which, under normal circumstances, would have sent Harry's mind spinning. Now, his thoughts had been concentrated into three objectives. The first, locate his brother and get him to safety.

Harry barely felt the apparition, trusting Percy implicitly. Percy had taken them to his family's tents. Everyone was already outside, jackets thrown hastily over their pajamas, half-asleep and scared. Harry focused on his brother, who in turn was transfixed by the chaos erupting around them. Harry turned to see what he was looking at, reflexively reaching for a Calming Draught when he understood what was happening.

"I heard a prophecy..."

Percy was still holding his hand. Harry squeezed it once, then let go. Percy would be fine. The Death Eaters weren't hunting purebloods that evening. He had to get Monty to safety.

"Get into the woods and stick together," Mr. Weasley was saying.

“No,” Harry snapped, turning away from the poor muggle family being tortured midair. “You, Bill, Charlie, and Percy are going to take these six back to the Burrow.”

Mr. Weasley shook his head. “This is not a debate! Do you—”

Bill and Charlie were trying to run towards the fighting. Harry couldn’t allow that. They bounced off the shield he absentmindedly conjured. He spared a moment to be annoyed with himself for his lack of progress on the portkey front, otherwise he would have shoved them all back into the tent and shipped them off.

“You are suggesting,” Harry said slowly and clearly, making sure Mr. Weasley understood every word, “that while Death Eaters are muggle-hunting, an underage muggleborn girl, a muggle-raised girl who hasn’t even begun Hogwarts, and the Boy Who Lived are to remain in this situation? *Your* children are safe, Mr. Weasley. It’s the rest of us they want dead.”

A nearby tent went up in flames. Harry ignored it.

“You will take them to the Burrow,” Harry continued, “and then you can come back to help the Ministry. Their safety is the priority.”

A tent was blasted away, flying over their heads to crash into another. Hopefully the inhabitants had already fled.

His fingers twitched on his wand. He wasn’t entirely sure what he would do if his brother wasn’t evacuated. That it hadn’t been the first thing Mr. Weasley did was infuriating.

“Do you want to explain to Sirius Black why his godson was left to fend for himself?” Harry asked.

Before Mr. Weasley could respond, Percy stepped forward, grabbed Ginny and Mafalda, and vanished.

“Damnit,” Bill said, running over to Ron and Hermione.

“Dad?” Charlie asked as Bill apparated them away.

Mr. Weasley held his wand uncertainly, conflicted. But he closed his eyes and nodded. “Monty, I’ll take you. Charlie, you get Fred and George.”

Charlie glanced at Harry, then nodded.

Monty looked at Harry too. The screaming was louder now. Harry could make out the laughter of individual Death Eaters, if that’s what they were. Or people who thought it was fun to play along with whoever had initiated the mayhem.

“What about you?” Monty asked him.

“I can take you both,” Mr. Weasley said quickly. “But we need to go. *Now*.”

“What about me?” Harry said, turning to watch the mob approach. “I’m not going anywhere. I need to find my cat.”

“But—”

Whatever Monty had wanted to say was lost as Mr. Weasley finally apparated him away.

Harry stood by the tents as fleeing people ran past him into the woods, and as Ministry workers poured in to contain the mob and rescue their muggle victims. In his desperation to get Monty away from it all, Harry had not processed the fullness of what was happening around him.

The campsite had become a warzone. The crowd of hooded witches and wizards slowly marched across the field, lit by the flash of spellfire as they set tents aflame, stoked celebratory bonfires into wild conflagrations, flames dancing in sickly hues. The path before them exploded, sending tents, carts, and sometimes people hurtling through the air. Noisome black smoke issued from the fires, choking the air and stinging his eyes. It was hard to breathe, and it was becoming hard to see. The people fleeing were caught up in a mindless horror, crashing into each other, trampling those who had fallen, their frenzy interfering with the Ministry’s attempts to contain the havoc which had enveloped them all.

One of the muggles, a woman, was flipped upside down, her nightgown falling open as the crowd beneath her jeered. Their wands were raised to the sky, casting spells to stun, daze, terrify. A flash of bright green, narrowly missing one of the children they had captured. Repeated, loud bangs like the rapport of gunfire, rattled Harry’s teeth. Black robes, faces obscured by masks, laughing as the muggle man was twisted into an unnatural shape, his voice hoarse from screaming, from begging for the lives of his family.

They were hostages. If the riot was stopped, the muggles would easily be killed. Particularly the little ones, the children spinning madly in the air. The smallest child’s head whipped back and forth, faster and faster, as he shrieked in pain and terror.

One false move and the boy’s neck would snap. What, exactly, had Mr. Weasley intended to do to help *that*?

The encroaching crowd kept growing. It was a harrowing reminder of exactly how many had supported the Dark Lord, how many still did even years after his defeat. The ideologies that had drawn allies to him had never gone away. Harry saw it play out in the Wizengamot, on the pages of the *Daily Prophet*. The hatred of muggles, the dehumanization of muggleborns, the disgust for anyone not fully human, non-human creatures treated like chattel. The Dark Lord’s absence was merely a lull in their political project, a temporary setback in the purification of magical society.

They loathed Monty for it, and Mr. Weasley had tried to send him gallivanting about the woods in the dark.

A spell in a grisly shade of red raced towards Harry. He summoned a tipped over lawn chair to block it, shattering the chair in the process. He would become a genuine target if he remained where he was.

He hoped the Weasleys were intelligent enough to *not* apparate into the middle of a fight. Based on what little he had observed that evening, he would not count on it.

Harry raised his wand, the charm falling easily from his lips. Years of practicing defense in the common room had prepared him for exactly this.

“Protego horribilis.”

Percy’s mother screamed when he apparated directly into the kitchen, holding on to his little sister and cousin with all of his might. He had never apparated two people at once, and definitely not across the entire country. He released them and fell to the floor, breathing heavily.

Ginny and Mafalda were safe. He had to get back to Harry.

“What are you doing here?” his mother demanded. “What is going on?”

He looked up, making sure the girls were intact. That he hadn’t splinched one or both of them. They were pale and shaking, but were otherwise fine.

Percy dropped his head again. He needed...

There was a *crack*, and something crashed into the table. His mother screamed again.

“Bill? What on earth is happening?”

“Death Eaters,” Bill said shortly. Then, “Is Percy alright?”

Percy shook his head. He was nowhere near alright. Two boots appeared next to him, and soon Bill was lifting him into a seat.

“Mum, stop screaming! He needs something to eat!”

He fell forward onto the table. Stupid, to take two at once, but he couldn’t choose one over the other. They were the youngest, the most vulnerable. It was his duty to protect them. Harry had been right. Percy hadn’t stopped to think. Harry wanted things to be a certain way, and Percy had made it so.

Harry.

“Harry’s still there,” Percy mumbled, pushing himself upright again. A glass of water was placed in front of him. It made him realize how abominably thirsty he was.

“Harry?” his mother said, just as someone else apparated in.

“Dad’s bringing Monty,” Charlie said. He sounded out of breath, which made Percy feel marginally better about himself. He wasn’t weak.

He drank the water.

Another *crack*.

“—you’re a muggleborn too!” Monty exclaimed. “Mr. Weasley, we have to go back!”

Percy opened his eyes to look around the crowded kitchen. His mother was in a full panic, shouting questions. Bill was trying to calm her down. Fred had a gash down his arm, and George was ripping off his jacket to staunch the blood flow. Splinched. Ginny had thrown herself at Charlie, and after a moment Mafalda followed suit. Ron and Hermione were trying to reason with Monty, who was nearly as panicked as Percy's mother.

Would she allow any of them to return?

“Harry said he was going to look for his cat,” his father said heavily. “That boy...”

“What about Harry?” his mother said. Her wand was in her hand now. Percy had no idea what she was planning to do with it.

His father shook his head. “He insisted we bring everyone back. A bit forcefully...”

Percy looked at his mother, at the strange light in her eyes.

“Why did Harry have to insist that?” she asked carefully.

His father grimaced, then looked away. “I need to get back. You didn’t see that crowd, Molly. The Ministry needs all the help it can get.”

“And Harry!” Monty said. “We can’t just leave him there!”

His father was already turning, apparating back to the moor. Bill and Charlie exchanged a look, both exhausted but determined, and followed suit.

Percy wanted to go too. But he knew he needed time to recover. He was useless like this. To himself. To his family. To Harry.

“Evans will be fine.”

Percy glanced at Fred, who gave him a shaky smile. It looked wrong.

“He’s a scary bloke,” George added with a theatrical shudder. “I wouldn’t want to get on his bad side.”

“I bet those Death whatsits will be running from *him*,” Fred added.

Monty didn’t look convinced. Why was he so worried about Harry? It wasn’t as if they knew each other.

“You should’ve heard what he said to dad,” George said to their mother.

Her panic reached its peak when she saw Fred's injury.

Percy drank more water. He had no idea what promises Ron and Hermione were making to Monty to calm him down. George was digging around Fred's pockets, finally pulling out the half-eaten chocolate bar. He set it in front of Percy, then tried to talk to their mother. Fred's arm was wrapped in thick bandages. He flexed it and winced.

Everything was too loud, too bright. Percy peeled foil away from the chocolate bar. Harry was alone, against dozens of people who wanted his kind dead.

“I have to go back,” he said to himself.

Their mother was no longer listening. She began making tea for everyone, summoning things as she worked. She was thinking about her husband and two eldest sons fighting Death Eaters while she had to remain home. Waiting.

He shoved chocolate into his mouth, wishing fervently he would recover, that he could get back to Harry.

For the first time, Percy truly understood how his mother felt.

Just within the treeline, Harry watched first Mr. Weasley, then Bill and Charlie return. In the exact spots they had left from. A spell crashed into the shield he had charmed around the area, making the three flinch. Harry crossed his arms, waiting to see if Percy arrived. Mr. Weasley and his eldest sons ran to join the fray. A minute passed, and another. Percy did not return.

Harry dispelled the shield.

His brother was safe. That was what was important. It was galling that Harry hadn't been able to ensure that directly. He'd had to strongarm Mr. Weasley into doing it. They would remember that. Hopefully they would chalk it up to muggleborn camaraderie, and not any particular concern for Monty Potter.

Harry turned away from the ongoing riot and the Ministry's feeble attempts to contain it. He would wager half the people laughing were Ministry employees.

Monty was safe.

He wasn't eager to walk through the woods, given how many crying and screaming people were running around, but he needed to find Lady Madeleine. He had asked her to retrieve Neville's wand, wherever it was. That meant she would retrace his path. Neville's path led to the stadium.

Out of habit from sneaking about Hogwarts, Harry disillusioned himself. He should have done that from the off, at least on Monty. No one could hurt his brother if they couldn't find him. He'd have to tell Monty to keep his invisibility cloak with him at all times, particularly if Death Eaters were coming out of the woodwork.

"The Dark Lord approaches."

As he skirted the woods, running as fast as he dared, Harry let his mind wander. If he had known how to apparate, he could have taken Monty immediately. If he could make portkeys, he could have got them all to safety. If he'd brought a broom, he would already be at the stadium. But things were always obvious in hindsight, and a Death Eater rally was not something anyone had anticipated. Except for those who had known. Those who had planned it.

Harry frowned. Had it been planned, or was it opportunistic? Was it related to the prophecy?

He reached the end of the woods, still trying to wrap his head around what motivated the Death Eaters to act now. Unless the Ministry arrested the rioters, which seemed unlikely given how outnumbered they were, Harry doubted there would be any answers.

He paused to catch his breath, looking up at the stadium. It was still lit up. Neville had been in the Top Box. Resigned, Harry started forward.

Something lunged at him out of the dark, and a spell was halfway to being cast by the time he realized who it was. Lady Madeleine, her grey fur standing on end.

"Meow."

"It's cherry and unicorn hair," Harry said. "A needle in a haystack."

Her tail lashed in affront, then she ran for the trees. Harry followed, not wanting his cat to get crushed by panicking people. She was smart, and fast, but also headstrong and impulsive.

Lady Madeleine slowed her pace, but kept him walking at a steady clip. He passed different groups who had sought shelter in the woods. As if trees were any barrier, when a child could cast a spell to make them walk.

Several veela, seemingly ambivalent to the ongoing battle, used their allure on a group of young men. Beauxbatons students who had lost their headmistress were asking passersby for help. Based on the pictures he'd seen, their headmistress was a very hard woman to miss. Where had she run off to?

The path he took was erratic, Lady Madeleine darting back and forth. Harry knew her senses were keen, superior to those of a muggle cat, but asking her to find one wand among thousands of fleeing people was asking the impossible.

Perhaps Neville *had* left it at home. It wouldn't be unusual, Neville was often accused of being forgetful. The most notorious example was his lost list of passwords to the Gryffindor common room.

The memory brought Harry to a stop. Neville hadn't lost those. They had been stolen. Being forgetful was not the same as being careless with one's belongings, and wands were precious. Unique. Nigh irreplaceable. One could get another wand, but it would never be the same as the one which had first chosen them.

He was in the heart of the woods now. The trees were older, their entwined canopies blocking most of the sky. He could no longer hear any crying or screaming, see the flashes of light from the mob, smell the stench of burning tents. Lady Madeleine was at his side, belly to the ground, her ears pricked forward.

Before he could consider *why* someone would steal Neville Longbottom's wand, a new sound broke the stillness of the night.

"Morsmordre!"

Harry gripped his wand, then looked up through the dark branches. He knew what he would see. The same spell that had hovered over his mum's home in Godric's Hollow. To this day, no one knew who had cast it.

The spell ripped through the trees, slithering into the sky, a chilling shade of green that flooded the woods with its virulence. It swirled in the air, a thousand deadly points that coalesced into an immense, grotesque skull. It wasn't an abstraction, or a caricature. It was anatomically perfect, the artistry and precision staggeringly impressive. The creator of the spell had been a genius. This obscene refinement, this masterful spellcrafting, was all the better to terrorize. The fleshless skull of some colossus, something so powerful, so far beyond human, it could scarcely be conceived. Dull green light smoldered in the depths of its empty sockets, gazing blinding at all who stood beneath it.

The skull unhinged its jaw in an unvoiced cry. From between its gargantuan teeth, a snake's head emerged. The head twitched, working its way free. He had seen the basilisk in his dad's memories, a worm in comparison to the behemoth that writhed above him. The snake reared back and bared its scintillating fangs, poised to strike.

Harry flinched when the screaming began anew. He sank to the ground, next to his shivering cat, shrinking into the darkness. He had forgotten he was disillusioned. It didn't matter.

It had been thirteen years since anyone had seen the Dark Mark, but they remembered it. They remembered what it meant.

Death.

Harry peered into the green-tinged shadows. If there were any lingering doubts that Death Eaters were behind the events that night, they were long gone. No one else would have cast that spell. No one else would even know it.

Mr. Weasley had told his brother to run into these very woods. Into the open arms of Death Eaters. That mob had been moving towards their tents. Monty was a target. Monty would always be a target.

The repeated *crack* of apparition interrupted Harry's thoughts. He flattened himself over Lady Madeleine, who was too clever to make a noise of complaint, just as the spells began flying.

"Stupefy!"

Bright red lights sped through the woods, slamming into trees, ricocheting off each other, clashing with the green that still shone from above. Harry closed his eyes, breathed in the scent of earth and decaying leaves, felt his cat shaking. It grounded him.

Once the spells faded away, the group of Ministry witches and wizards began arguing. He heard familiar voices. Amos Diggory. Arthur Weasley. The trees were being searched for any persons stunned.

"Protego totalum," he breathed, too rattled to trust any wordless spell he might cast.

Lady Madeleine began twitching, and Harry lifted himself up, worried he was suffocating her. She wriggled from under him and darted away. He could only watch her tail disappear around a tree, unable to call out for her lest he expose them both. He had no interest in being accused of casting the Dark Mark. Of being accused of murder.

The search through the trees went on for some time. Harry went still as one of the wizards walked by. It was Mr. Crouch, a look of intense concentration on his face as he moved branches and pushed through shrubbery. Harry distantly noted Mr. Crouch had also chosen to wear a suit. It made him think of Percy.

Was Percy okay? Had he made it safely to the Burrow? Why hadn't he returned?

Mr. Crouch moved on.

A nearby shrub rustled, and Lady Madeleine crawled out from under it. She held a wand in her mouth.

Harry watched in disbelief as she deposited it at his side. She looked immensely proud of herself for having found it.

He slowly pushed himself up, then picked up the wand. It was hard to tell in the dark, and he was no wandmaker, but the wand had the pale rose color of cherry heartwood.

Harry looked up at the sky again, then at Neville's wand.

The search reached a fruitless end. The Ministry witches and wizards departed, back to help at the campsite, or to round up people hiding in the woods. Eventually, Harry was alone again.

"Prior incantato."

Thick, grey smoke poured from Neville's wand, condensing to form a simulacrum of the Dark Mark. It lingered in the air, ghastly in its mockery. Harry silently watched it, a mere shadow of the skull that loomed in the sky above him.

“Deletrius,” Harry whispered.

Welcome Home

Chapter Summary

August 1994

Morning after the Quidditch World Cup

Harry uncorked the vial with his teeth and downed the potion. A cool wave swept through him, and he sighed in relief. He didn't know how long it had been since the Ministry people left. Lady Madeleine's claws pricked his leg.

"I know," he said, standing up. He tucked Neville's wand into his jacket and began walking back to the campsite. The disillusionment cracked and fell away. He crossed his arms, deep in thought.

Death Eaters. The Dark Mark. A prophecy. He didn't know what it meant.

Thirteen years. It was an ominous number.

The woods had emptied, the people who had sought safety in the trees fleeing back into the moor when the Dark Mark appeared. Nowhere had been safe. The stadium, perhaps, but the Ministry had no control over the situation at all. Where were the aurors? Busy doing another raid in Knockturn?

There was a sharp *crack*, and Harry froze. Someone had just apparated nearby.

"Stay behind me," he whispered, feeling stupid for walking around so openly. He had no idea if it was safe, who was still in the woods.

He approached a clearing with his wand held out, what he recognized as the designated apparition point. He hurried forward when he realized only one person was so rule-abiding to still use it in the middle of a riot.

In the center of the clearing, lit by the Dark Mark still casting its haunting light over the woods, was Percy. He was doubled over, catching his breath.

"Percy," Harry said, looking around in case someone else, someone dangerous, also came to investigate. "Are you insane? Why did you come back?"

Percy pushed himself up, his eyes closed, taking slow, deep breaths.

"You were here," Percy said.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Harry muttered, walking up to Percy. He wanted to throw himself at Percy, but held back. A Ministry employee entangled with a student? And with him away at school, when would he even spend time with Percy?

“Death Eaters,” Percy panted, swaying a little. Harry gave in and caught Percy before he fell. Percy was too thin for his height. Who was going to make sure he ate?

“Someone conjured the Dark Mark,” Harry said, smiling as Percy put his arms around his shoulders. “I haven’t heard any explosions for a while. I think it’s over.”

“Good,” Percy said, bending down to kiss him. He pulled away before Harry could respond.

“It wasn’t a *no*,” Percy said, resting his weight on Harry. He was easy to support. Harry would carry Percy home if he had to, to hell with magic. “It was a *not yet*. I wouldn’t...hide you. Deserve...better...”

Harry snorted, tipping Percy’s chin up so he could gaze into his eyes. He looked absolutely wrecked.

“I think we both deserve what we want,” Harry said, enjoying the flush creeping up Percy’s neck.

When Percy had caught his breath, and eaten a piece of chocolate that looked like it had seen better days, they left the clearing and began walking towards the campsite, Lady Madeleine running ahead. Harry placed Percy’s arm over his shoulders and wrapped an arm around Percy’s waist. To help him walk.

“Do you need a potion?” Harry asked. “I’ve got a few on me. Insomnolence Draught, Wakemeups, Invigoration Potation—”

“Is that not a philter?” Percy said, looking at him suspiciously.

Harry smiled innocently. “They’re all stimulants, Perce. Brewed by yours truly. I’ve been awake for over twenty-four hours. I couldn’t sleep if I wanted to.”

“That cannot be good for you.”

Harry shrugged, too preoccupied with Percy’s waist to care. He felt oddly giddy, knew it was stupid with the Dark Mark still overhead, with who knew how many people injured, perhaps killed. It was a side effect of the Calming Draught, forcing physical calmness on his body, but also making him care less about things that would distress him.

Lady Madeleine would start yowling if she noticed anything.

The walk to the campsite was too short. Percy was still unsteady on his feet, but when Harry released him he straightened.

“I’ve seen pictures like this before,” Percy said, taking in the state of the field. It was dark, only the moon and the light from wands illuminating the destruction. “In Muggle Studies.”

“It looks like it’s been shelled,” Harry agreed. The only people out were from the Ministry, repairing tents that had been burned, filling holes that had been blasted out of the ground, putting out fires. Harry snorted when he saw who else was roaming around.

“They always show up too late,” he said, watching the group of aurors as they approached.

“I need to find my father and brothers,” Percy said, looking to where his family’s tents were. They were among the few tents undamaged.

“Halt!” one of the aurors called out, pointing his wand at them.

“We’ve already halted,” Harry muttered, putting his wand away.

“Hands where I can see them!”

“Just do what they say,” Percy whispered, raising his hands slowly.

“State your name and business!” the lead auror snapped. He was bulky for a wizard, hard-faced with militaristic grey hair.

“They’re just students, Dawlish,” another auror said. Harry recognized her instantly.

“It’s Wonky-Tonks,” Harry said, grinning at her.

Her jaw dropped. “How *dare* you! Arrest them!”

The mean auror, Dawlish, spun to face Nymphadora Tonks. “Do you know this person?”

Her hair turned a gross yellowish brown, the color of her defeat. “My mortal enemy. The architect of my destruction.”

Dawlish pointed his wand at Harry again.

“At gobstones,” Harry clarified. “She is talking about *gobstones*.”

“And you,” Tonks said, spinning to confront Percy. “You’re Charlie’s little brother. The swotty one.”

Percy gave her a flat look. “Percy Weasley, Department of International Magical Cooperation.”

“Harry Evans, intern at the Portkey Office,” Harry said. “And a muggleborn.”

Dawlish’s eyes narrowed, but he finally lowered his wand. “What were you doing in the woods?”

“Looking for my cat,” Harry said. There was a little *meow* behind him, and he turned to smile at Lady Madeleine. “She ran off when the fighting started.”

“What happened with the agitators?” Percy asked, lowering his hands.

Tonks snorted. “Bastards legged it when that popped up,” she said, glancing at the Dark Mark.

After a few more questions, Harry and Percy were finally allowed to walk through the campsite. The aurors trotted off to harass other people. Tonks stuck her tongue out, and Harry flipped her off.

To his delight, Percy laughed. It was a quiet laugh, as if Percy was unused to laughing. Harry would henceforth dedicate his life to hearing it again.

He was going to miss Percy terribly when he went back to Hogwarts. School wouldn’t be the same without him.

They slowed as they neared the Weasley tents. Harry wasn’t looking forward to seeing Mr. Weasley again. He was still irritated with the man, at how close his brother had come to running into whoever had cast the Dark Mark, or being stampeded by a crowd. And he doubted Mr. Weasley appreciated Harry ordering him around. Harry was only glad he had been listened to. He did not want to resort to more forceful methods of persuasion.

“I have a feeling a lot of people will be looking for a portkey,” Harry said, stopping a few feet away from the tent. Percy turned to look at him, then glanced at the tent.

“I—” he began, taking a step towards Harry.

The tent flap opened, and Bill stuck his head out. Harry saw, to his alarm, that half of it was bandaged.

“I thought that was you,” Bill said to Percy, his speech slurred. “Are you coming in too, Harry?”

Harry checked his watch. “I need to help with the exodus.”

“The what?” Bill asked.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “I suppose that’s a muggle term. Well, I’m off.”

As he turned to begin his search for Basil Montgomery or Slaw Cram, Percy grabbed his arm. Harry watched him, wondering what Percy planned to do.

Percy swallowed, then said, “Have a good evening, Evans. Thank you for your assistance.”

Aware Bill was watching them, Harry only said, “Goodnight, Weasley.”

Having a sixteen-year-old attempt to put hundreds of agitated people into some kind of order was not one of the Ministry’s best decisions.

It was just Harry and Mr. Montgomery, who was making portkeys as fast as possible while the crowd screamed abuse.

“Fuck this,” Harry muttered, taking out his wand. “*Sonorus*. Listen up! You can either queue up or you can walk home!”

His voice boomed across the moor, cutting through the noise of the crowd.

“You tell them, Haz!” a distant voice shouted.

“I’m only going to say this *once*,” Harry said, glaring at an elderly man in a flowery nightgown who was trying to nab a broken vase. “Domestic portkeys to the left, international to the right. Anyone *not* in line will not get a portkey. Queue up, or piss off. *Quietus*.”

Harry summoned the vase from the old man, who pouted and hobbled away to join the domestic queue. Harry put his wand away, waiting for the crowd to obey. He wished they would be rational and considerate of each other, that they didn’t have to be told to behave nicely, and he resented that he was the one who had to keep such a large group in check. Dealing with the first-years had been hard enough. These were adults, acting like colicky children.

The first person who tried to skip ahead was unceremoniously sent to the back. Begging, crying, negotiating, people tried it all, but Harry knew he had to hold a firm line or be overrun.

He checked the sky, worried he wouldn’t be able to slip off for his dawn incantation. He frowned when he saw a dark cloud approaching the moor, almost invisible against the pre-dawn sky.

Others noticed, pointing towards the sky. The noise of the crowd rose, then subsided once they realized what it was.

Owls.

There was only one reason so many owls would be approaching them.

“The bloody *Prophet* released an early issue,” Harry muttered, glancing at where the Dark Mark still rose above the woods. No one had been able to dispel it. He couldn’t imagine a worse thing happening, other than the Death Eaters returning. He waved on a group headed for somewhere in Spain, digging out coins to pay the delivery owl. One look at the front page was all he needed to see.

The next few minutes were almost peaceful, people reading through the article written about their experience the night before. Mr. Montgomery got a moment to breathe, and no one tried to skip the queue.

Then Sirius Black arrived. Harry could tell from the din his apparition made that the man was furious.

“Where is he?” Black demanded, marching straight for Harry, a white-knuckled grip on his wand. Harry waved on another group, wondering why Black had come to him first. Or had he already gone to the Weasleys' tents?

“At the Burrow,” Harry said. “Party of twelve for Phu Chi Fa.”

Black didn't respond, apparating on the spot.

Harry briefly wished his dad would come and get him. He was tired, and knew it was only a matter of time until he crashed. Thinking of his dad worsened Harry's mood. He had an important question to ask him.

There was a break in the crowd, and Harry made out three tall figures and a stockier one. The red hair was a dead giveaway.

There was a tiff over another hopeful queue jumper, and Harry used the distraction to perform the incantation.

He slipped a hand into his jacket, sliding his wand so the tip rested over his heart. Under his breath, he quickly muttered the words.

“*Amato animo...*”

As he spoke, there was a strange thump in his chest, like he had grown a second heart. Harry ignored it, telling himself it was normal. He released his wand, then walked over to break up the fight.

No one was in a state to apparate. His father and both of his brothers had been injured while fighting. Percy hadn't fought, but he was still exhausted. He needed to turn in the cauldron report.

His father spoke to Basil Montgomery, the Keeper of the Portkeys and Harry's supervisor, and he found himself at the front of the queue.

“This undermines my authority,” Harry said, giving him a small smile. Then he called out, “Party of four, The Burrow, front garden.”

“Not Stoatshead Hill?” Percy asked.

“I reckon you didn't see the *Prophet*,” Harry said, wrinkling his nose. “Brace yourself, Perce. Sirius Black's going to read your dad the riot act.”

He was too tired to parse Harry's bewildering muggle sayings. “I will see you at work.”

“You just did,” Harry said, smirking at him. “Your family's waiting.”

Percy jerked, and saw his father and brothers were holding a moldy-looking green ball.

“It’s a tennis ball,” Harry explained. “Looks like a dog chewed on it.”

“Lovely,” Percy said, walking over to join his family. He touched the slightly damp ball and was whisked away.

He landed in the Burrow’s garden, nearly squashing a garden gnome, a bit nauseated from the trip. He was looking forward to making himself a cup of coffee, doing a final read through of the cauldron report, and—

The kitchen door slammed open, and his mother came running out, Sirius Black hot on her heels. Both of them carried copies of the *Daily Prophet*. For a moment, Percy worried his mother would start strangling his father, but she burst into tears and threw her arms around him. Percy glanced at Black, who looked deeply unamused.

“Can someone explain to me,” Black said in a deathly cold voice, interrupting the touching reunion, “why my godson was told to hide in the woods?”

Severus had woken up early to get a start on a batch of Wolfsbane. He’d continued brewing it through the summer for Lupin, and would be forced to do so for another school year. There was no end in sight.

He had been mildly surprised that a post owl had come early with the *Daily Prophet*. Assuming it was related to the Quidditch World Cup, and anticipating his son would soon return home, Severus parted with his money and tipped the owl for her speedy service. Then he unrolled the paper.

SCENES OF TERROR AT THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP

His world stopped, his eyes fixed on the black-and-white photograph of the Dark Mark.

He stood. He needed to get to his son. Or was it already too late? He had taken Lily, and now he was going to take—

Severus looked at the article again. Running in headfirst would not do Harry any favors. If he was even still alive.

He read quickly, picking out the key points.

Dark wizards running unchecked...alleging that nobody had been hurt...

Severus sat back down. No casualties. Harry was fine. He was a skilled wizard for his age, he was clever, he worked for a department that specialized in transportation. He should have taught his son how to apparate. He would correct that deficiency immediately.

He decided to wait. Waiting was always the hardest part. Waiting, not daring to hope, expecting the worst.

Spinner's End was quiet without Harry, without that miscreant cat of his. There were relics of Harry's existence. His skateboard. A hooded jumper. A book he had been reading, *Sheepfarmer's Daughter*.

Time passed. Severus dutifully performed the incantation, hoping Harry was unharmed and able to do the same. He made coffee. He began the Wolfsbane. He reread the article. He stared at the Dark Mark.

He knew the spell. He had cast it before.

The headmaster had certainly seen the article, and yet had not contacted him. What did it mean?

The morning stretched on. He checked on the potion. He read the article. He made coffee. He put out Harry's cup. He picked up the book and read a few pages. A girl with an alcoholic father, who grew strong enough to take his beatings, strong enough to leave. He set the book down again. His son had strange taste in literature.

Finally, at noon, as he did another lap through the house, the floo flared up, and Harry stepped out, his cat cradled in his arms. She jumped down, then jumped onto Severus' armchair.

"Are you injured?" he demanded, taking out his wand. He wasn't a healer like Pomfrey, but he knew enough.

Harry's face was curiously blank. "Did you know?"

Severus's wand stilled. "I did not."

Harry smiled slightly. "I need to sleep."

Severus dropped his wand, catching his son before he collapsed. Harry had fallen asleep, right where he stood. Severus would interrogate him about what cocktail of potions he had taken to end up like this. But, for the moment, he could only be relieved that his son had returned to him.

Severus shooed the cat off his chair, then transfigured it into a bed. It would have to do. He carefully laid Harry down on it. The cat immediately jumped on top of him, curling into a fuzzy grey ball.

He watched the two for some time, wondering at the peculiar sense of peace he felt. When he was satisfied Harry was deeply asleep, he summoned the potions Harry had secreted about his person. He would have to do some testing.

As he headed for his lab, he paused at the top of the staircase. He looked back to his sleeping child, to reassure himself that Harry was still there.

“Welcome home,” he said quietly, then shut the door behind him.

Perfectly Okay

Chapter Summary

August 1994

Monty crept to the kitchen door. Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, Ginny, and Mafalda all pressed together to get a better look at the scene playing out in the Burrow's garden.

Mr. Weasley and Ron's older brothers had just returned. Mrs. Weasley had been up all night worrying. Sirius had shown up soon after the *Daily Prophet* arrived, demanding to see him. Monty never thought someone would be so happy to see him, or that anyone would have cried over him.

"I don't know what I would have done if I lost you. I've just got you back..."

He hadn't considered what Sirius might think about the riot at the World Cup. He'd never had anyone like Sirius before, an adult who worried about him. He felt guilty for not letting Sirius know he was safe, though Monty had no idea how he would have contacted him. Hermione had been tight-lipped about her own parents, once someone thought to ask. Monty doubted she would tell them anything.

Sirius' relief had changed to anger when Mr. Weasley arrived. And now he was in the garden, shouting at Ron's dad.

"I trusted you," Sirius said. His back was turned to him, so Monty couldn't see his expression. He could only see how tired and ashamed Mr. Weasley looked. Monty felt embarrassed for him, which made the whole thing worse. He was Ron's *dad*.

"I trusted you to keep Monty safe," Sirius said.

"He would have been safe," Mr. Weasley began.

Sirius thrust that morning's *Daily Prophet* in his face. "Does this look safe to you, Arthur? Do you not understand what that boy means to them? You are honestly telling me Monty would be *safe* around someone who knows this spell?"

"Sirius," Mrs. Weasley said. "Perhaps we can speak in the kitchen. I know you're upset—"

"Upset?" Sirius echoed. "Upset does not begin to describe what I am."

"If you had been there," Mr. Weasley tried.

Sirius laughed harshly. “If? *If*? I was in the war. I was in the streets, fighting Death Eaters alongside *your* brothers, Molly!” He put a hand over his face, and Monty tightened his grip on the doorframe. “I made that mistake, Arthur. I decided to go after Peter instead of taking care of Monty. I left him behind. It cost me *twelve years* of my life. It cost me twelve years with him!”

“But the children were brought here,” Mrs. Weasley said. “They were safe, Sirius. It worked out in the end.”

Sirius laughed again. “And whose idea was that?” He shook his head. “I’m done. Monty, we’re leaving.”

Monty jumped at hearing his name, then hurried into the garden. Sirius turned around, giving him a small smile and pulling him into a hug.

“You can collect your things later,” Sirius said, “but you’re not leaving my sight until you get on the train.”

“I’m fine,” Monty weakly protested. He didn’t mind staying at Grimmauld Place for the rest of the holiday. He wanted to spend as much time there as he could.

“I guess I owe that brat another debt,” Sirius muttered. He looked back at Mr. Weasley. “I can’t believe I’m saying this to another adult, but I’m disappointed in you, Arthur. Get your priorities in order, mate.”

Sirius didn’t wait for a response. He apparated away, taking Monty with him.

Percy glanced over his *Daily Prophet*, watching his father pour a generous measure of Odgens in his tea. It had been awkward after Sirius Black left with Monty. His parents looked to have aged a decade. His mother couldn’t stop crying.

“We’re all perfectly okay,” his father said. “That’s what’s important.”

Percy turned back to his paper. No one liked to see their father spoken to in such a way, or disrespected. He was...he was dad. Percy had long since learned his parents didn’t know everything, couldn’t fix every problem. He had grown accustomed to carrying the weight of their expectations with none of the support his siblings received.

Percy still wanted to look up to his father.

The article was unflattering. Unsurprising, given it was one of Rita Skeeter’s pieces, and how botched the response to the crypto-Death Eaters was. He was honestly surprised that the aurors bothered to show up at all. They should have already been there, patrolling the game instead of taking the opportunity to round up downtrodden part-humans in Knockturn Alley.

Lax security. Skeeter was right about that.

“I’m mentioned,” his father said, sounding demoralized.

Percy frowned as his father read the section aloud. After the appearance of the Dark Mark, the rioters had scattered, and his father had spoken to those who had gathered outside of the wood. Not at length, only saying they hadn’t caught whoever had conjured the Dark Mark, and that he wanted to go to bed.

It wasn’t a good look. Percy could think of a dozen other things to say. *We are currently investigating*, or *We are waiting for DMLE’s report*. Admitting to failure, to ignorance, was an amateur mistake. He could appreciate that his father had been tired, scared by the reappearance of the Dark Mark, overwhelmed. But something as simple as *that’s not my department* would have sufficed. And now he was in the *Daily Prophet*. It didn’t matter that he wasn’t named, the tale would be spread by those who had been there, whose concerns had been dismissed.

“Don’t take it to heart, father,” Percy said, setting his paper down. “Mr. Crouch says criticizing the Ministry sells papers. Skeeter obviously has a formula. Do you recall last week, when she ranted about cauldron thickness being a waste of Ministry resources? She said we should be, and I quote, *stamping out the vampire epidemic*. If she were any sort of journalist, she would know that it very clearly states in the *Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Wizard Part Humans*—”

“Shut up, Percy,” Bill said, taking a sip of tea. What was visible of his face pinched with pain.

Percy shut up.

All he had wanted was to make his father feel better, even though he felt, to a certain extent, his father deserved both Sirius Black’s anger and Rita Skeeter’s criticism.

He clenched his jaw. It was so much easier on the love potions, when only one thing mattered to him.

The thought made him sick.

Instead, he recalled how Harry had been the night before. One moment, Percy felt like he had been falling into his eyes. The next, he was slamming into a featureless wall. Occlumency. Control of one’s emotions. Mastery of one’s mind. He didn’t want Bill’s offhanded remark to bother him so much. It wasn’t that important. Bill would forget he said it. It didn’t mean anything to his older brother.

“I’m going to the office,” his father said, breaking the silence. “I need to smooth this over somehow.”

“I’ll come with,” Percy said, standing to follow his father out of the kitchen. He didn’t want to be at the Burrow anymore. He had a report to submit.

The Ministry was in shambles. His father had wisely suggested they take the floo—Percy’s ongoing floo powder investigation notwithstanding—and they emerged into a madhouse. People were running every which way, the air was crowded with lilac paper airplanes on collision courses. The line to the lifts was absurdly long, so Percy took the stairs. He dodged several owls on his way to the door. Owls hadn’t been used inside the Ministry for ages; they were all directed to the Owl Post Room, a subdivision of the Center for Magical Communications, in the Department of Magical Transportation. Harry’s department.

Stupidly hopeful, Percy stopped by Level Six. He took one look at the Post Room and turned around. It looked like the Owlery if the house-elves neglected to clean for a week.

The Portkey Office was empty. They were still helping people get home after the disaster the World Cup had become. He hoped Harry was managing alright. Having an intern work day and night was unreasonable, to say the least.

Since Harry wasn’t there, Percy left, walking up to his own department. Unlike the Department of Transportation, who were all in the field doing damage control, the Department of International Magical Cooperation was embattled. Owls were everywhere, several people from Maintenance trying in vain to get them under control. Among the letters being sent were Howlers, some bursting into flames midair, shrieking their messages. He spotted Lee Jordan’s father, Mr. Jordan, racing by, followed by several undersecretaries. Someone tried to open one of the illusory windows on the wall. Owls were being stunned left and right. Several people were crying. The state of the floor was unmentionable.

Percy placed a hand protectively in his robes, not wanting the report he had poured so much of his time into to be despoiled. Shielding himself from the owls as best he could, Percy made his way to Mr. Crouch’s office.

The door to Mr. Crouch’s office was closed. Percy had been certain the man would be in, given the state both the department and the entire Ministry were in. He walked to Miss Jorkins desk. Miss Jorkins was staring into space, a Howler sizzling on her desk.

“Do you know when Mr. Crouch will be back in?” Percy loudly asked her, making himself heard over the pandemonium.

It took a moment for Miss Jorkins to respond. “Barty?”

“Yes,” Percy said.

She blinked several times, then turned to look at him, her eyes unfocused. “Barty’s not here.”

“He is not,” Percy agreed. “I have a report for him.”

Miss Jorkins' eyes widened, her gaze becoming steadier. "Just pop it on his desk, pet. The door's unlocked."

"Thank you," Percy said, ducking under another owl. He returned to Mr. Crouch's door, opening it and quickly shutting it so no birds snuck in. He didn't want to linger, feeling uncomfortable in being given unfettered access to the department head's office. He set his report in the center of the desk, then moved it to one side. He didn't want to seem too desperate. He had resisted underlining his name.

When he left the office again, Miss Jorkins was no longer at her desk. Considering her desk was on fire, the Howler had gone off before she could open it. Shaking his head, Percy made the perilous journey to his own desk. As soon as sat down, an owl flew by and dropped a Howler on his head. Percy pushed up his glasses and took out his wand.

"*Auris obturatis*," he said, just as another Howler appeared in his in-tray. The world became magnificently silent, and Percy settled in for a long day.

Harry woke up with a gasp and saw his dad staring unhappily down at him.

"Get up," his dad said. He spun around, his robes flaring out behind him as he walked towards the back door.

Harry got up, wondering what time it was. Wondering what day it was. He was still wearing the suit. It was covered in grey cat fur. He'd have to start brushing Lady Madeleine on a daily basis.

He followed his dad into the back garden. It was getting dark out. He hadn't missed sunset.

"Your mother," his dad said, startling him, "was second only to me in Potions."

Harry slowly nodded.

"She was, in fact, Slughorn's favorite student," his dad continued. "She used to tease me about this, as not only was I the top student, but Slughorn was my head of house."

His dad crossed his arms, giving Harry a level look. "Your mother's favorite aspect of potions was testing the potions. On herself."

"Dad—"

"You are just as brilliant as her," his dad said, "and *twice* as reckless. You cannot treat your body so carelessly that it *shuts down*."

Harry opened his mouth to object. He *had* been careful. At first. Before the Death Eaters showed up.

His dad took out his wand, and Harry's mouth snapped shut.

"In the future, you will speak to me before using multiple potions," his dad said. "You will write a five foot essay on the interaction between rosemary oil and impundulu blood."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. Five feet. His dad was on the warpath. "What day is it?"

"You were asleep for six hours," his dad said. "If there was any justice in the world, it would have been *sixty*."

Harry winced. He didn't want to do the mandrake leaf again. "What are we doing out here?"

His dad waved his wand rather dismissively, conjuring a wooden hoop. It fell onto the scrubby grass.

"You will perform your incantation," his dad said. "And you will then master apparition."

"Right," Harry said, searching his jacket for his wand. His fingers found Neville's first. He needed to find a way to return it, none the wiser.

When he had performed the animagus incantation, once again ignoring the strange doubling of his heartbeat, his dad directed him to face the wooden hoop.

"Now," his dad said. "Apparate."

Harry gave him a look, but his dad merely raised an eyebrow expectantly. Sighing wearily, Harry pictured the center of the hoop in his mind, worked up the will to actually exist in that location, and turned on his heel.

"Hmm," his dad said. "As expected of my son."

Harry looked down and saw he was in the middle of the wooden hoop. All those failed portkeys hadn't been a waste of time after all.

"Wicked," Harry said, smiling to himself. "That's twelve galleons saved. Can I go back to sleep now?"

"*Aguamenti*," Percy said for the umpteenth time, putting out yet another Howler fire. His desk was a charred ruin. He didn't bother repairing it anymore. He still hadn't worked out why he was being sent so many letters about compensation for damaged goods. He had no control over the compensation fund. He didn't even work in the right department.

His favorite quill had gone up in flames. The fountain pen proved indestructible, or at least flame-resistant. It was getting a lot of use.

Someone tapped his shoulder, and Percy turned around to see Harry smiling at him. Harry leaned forward, and Percy immediately unblocked his ears.

“You know,” Harry said quietly, “muggles have got these things called sprinklers. An artificial rain of sorts. Could be useful.”

“You’ve been out of the office,” Percy said, his heart racing. He hadn’t seen Harry for two days. Just two days. He’d been going to work before dawn and leaving well after dark. He’d polished his proposal, but Mr. Crouch was still too busy to meet. Even his father was being run into the ground trying to contain the fall out of the security lapse. True, Muggle Artifacts was part of Magical Law Enforcement, but his father wasn’t an auror, or a politician.

“I’ve been sleeping,” Harry said, sitting down in the chair Percy still hadn’t got rid of, on the off chance Harry would sit in it. “Did a number on myself mixing potions.”

Percy frowned.

“It won’t happen again,” Harry said, rubbing the back of his head. “I’ve learned my lesson. And they’ve got me dealing with all the portkey complaints.”

Harry sighed, moving closer so their knees pressed together. Percy’s breath caught.

“I had an idea,” Harry said, looking Percy over with a slight frown. “Want to go out for lunch?”

The words were out before Percy could even think. “I’d love to.”

Harry stood, then preemptively downed another Howler with a jet of water. Percy hadn’t seen him draw his wand.

“I’ve been dying to snog you in the office,” Harry said. “You’re making it hard to keep it professional, Weasley.”

His face burning, Percy followed Harry past the lifts, then down the staircases the owls had yet to infiltrate.

“Where are we going?” Percy asked, noting that Harry was in his usual muggle clothes.

“I’m not sure,” Harry said, jumping down two steps. “We need to look around, first. Shops throw out old food. I used to dig around bins, when I wasn’t up to stealing. Bin diving.”

Percy made a noise of distaste.

“It’s not spoiled,” Harry said, looking over his shoulder. “Only on the verge of, sometimes.”

“That is not the part that I take issue with,” Percy said.

“Is it because I had to do it at all?” Harry asked. They had reached the door to the Atrium. “They’ve got food pantries. They give boxes of food to people. I used to go with someone, but when an eight-year-old shows up alone, they start asking questions.”

Percy didn't know how Harry could say such sad things so easily.

"It's not something I have to do anymore," Harry said, looking up at him. "And it's beside the point. The point, Mr. Weasley, is Gamp's Law."

"Gamp's Law," Percy repeated. "Nothing magically significant can be conjured?"

"Yeah," Harry said, reaching into one of his pockets. After a moment, he pulled out a sausage roll. It was still steaming.

"Why do you have a sausage roll in your pocket?" Percy asked.

"Don't sound too eager, Percy," Harry said, grinning at him. He took out his wand and pointed it at the sausage roll. "Watch this. *Goupen podynge*."

The sausage roll shivered, then split into two, each the same size as the original. Harry caught the second before it fell, handing Percy the original. He stared at the steaming roll. It had a flaky, golden crust, and it smelled amazing.

"Is that a spell specifically for doubling sausage rolls?" Percy asked evenly. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten.

"I found it in an old book," Harry said, taking a bite of his. "A *really* old book."

Percy looked at the sausage roll again. "The poor exchange rate makes purchasing muggle food inaccessible."

Harry nodded.

"But I can purchase small amounts, or retrieve that which the muggles discard, and use magic to increase the quantity."

Harry nodded again, his smile growing.

Percy bent down and kissed him. He found he quite liked the taste of sausage rolls.

Harry floated all the way to Magical Maintenance, biting his lip to suppress the idiotic grin he would otherwise be sporting. He had been slightly concerned with how Percy might respond to eating out of a skip. Percy being open to the idea was a pleasant surprise. Harry had been worrying about him taking care of himself. Not that Percy was incapable, or irresponsible. Sometimes, though, he seemed...indifferent.

Harry thought he understood.

He slunk through Level Three. He hadn't explored the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes much. He avoided it, the Obliviator Headquarters specifically. They had done a number on the muggles who owned the campsites. He had seen one of them, Mr. Roberts, shoveling dirt into his mouth and crying.

Even so, he knew where the Magical Maintenance offices were. That entire section of the floor was empty, as the number of maintenance requests was through the roof with the Ministry under siege. Harry unlocked the first office he came across, belonging to someone named Reginald Cattermole.

It was a cozy office, and Harry smiled at the picture of the man and his family. He spent some time searching through Mr. Cattermole's desk, finally locating the letterhead in a drawer.

Feeling bold, Harry sat in Mr. Cattermole's chair, opening more drawers to find a quill and ink. Once he was set up, he began to write.

Dear Neville Longbottom,

This wand was located in the Quidditch World Cup Stadium by a clean-up crew. Upon analysis, our records indicated that this wand is registered to you...

Bright-eyed

Chapter Summary

August 1994

Chapter Notes

I love reading the comments :)

Monty examined the Dark Mark that had appeared above the Quidditch World Cup, memorialized in a photograph the *Daily Prophet* had been printing all week. He had seen it before, in history books. That was where it belonged. In the past.

Sirius had made it clear that he wasn't upset with Monty. Monty wasn't responsible for how Sirius felt about the situation. The entire affair, the Death Eaters, the Dark Mark, Mr. Weasley's behavior, it had turned the mood in Grimmauld Place sour. Even Remus, who by force of habit looked on the bright side, was not immune.

Monty watched Hester fly around his room. He didn't know how he was going to get her to Hogwarts, with Sirius watching him like a hawk and Remus being a teacher. They knew she existed, which already put Monty at a disadvantage.

He set the *Daily Prophet* aside and picked up a quill. There was one person he trusted to come up with a solution, and to follow through with it. He had been relieved to hear from Sirius that Harry was fine, something Sirius told him unprompted. Monty knew he had been making a scene at the Burrow, which Ron and Hermione questioned him about. Monty's question was why they hadn't cared more. What about all of their other friends? They had seen Dean, and he was a muggleborn. It could have been him up there. Monty had got an owl from Luna, whose father had taken her and fled immediately. Luna meant everything to her dad

Who did Harry have to care about him?

Hester cried out, and Monty started writing. He needed to work out what to do with Hester, and there was something else. Something he had dismissed, until it was too late.

The dream he had the night before the Quidditch World Cup.

Monty had forgotten much of it, but what he remembered was vivid. It felt real. A scary baby, which sounded stupid but it *was* scary. The strange taste. The feeding. He felt, deep down, it was important.

He had no idea who to trust. Sirius was important to him, but Monty was still getting to know him. Same with Remus, who in a few days would go back to being Professor Lupin. There was Ron, but what did Ron know about dreams? Less than Monty, given the nonsense he turned in to Professor Trelawney. Hermione would think it was a medical issue, particularly if he mentioned his scar hurting. She'd tell him to go to St. Mungo's, or Dumbledore.

Monty quickly wrote that down. That was also important, the terrible pain in his scar.

They didn't really understand what it was like, being Monty Potter. The staring, the weirdly invasive articles, the whispers. Sirius knew what it was like, since he lived with similar treatment. Harry had warned him ages ago about his celebrity status, about discretion. Monty thought people only knew things about Harry that he wanted them to know, or things that didn't really matter. Knowing how Monty liked his eggs was a far cry from knowing the scar Voldemort gave him was acting up.

He finished the letter. Monty wasn't the best drawer, but he knew Harry would get it.

"A storm is coming."

Harry looked up from the letter his brother had sent. Monty had drawn a little occamy for his signature. It was adorable.

He knew his dad would pick up on any fluctuation in his mood. He had to act like everything was normal. But Monty's scar pain was very much not normal, and Harry was quietly freaking the fuck out.

"Really?" he asked. "When?"

"The evening before your return to school," his dad said, setting down a muggle newspaper. "Something has happened."

Harry nodded solemnly. "I need a cuddly toy for my baby brother."

His dad picked up the muggle paper again. "That is beyond the scope of my abilities."

Percy had naively assumed the deluge of Howlers would abate. As the end of the holiday neared, his desperation grew. He was hardly at home, too busy to spend what little time he had left with Harry, and was increasingly concerned that the current state of affairs would bury his cauldron report and the proposal he had slipped under it. He would lose his chance.

He leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes to enjoy the cold water raining down on him. It kept him alert, and kept the fires under control. Harry was...

Percy leapt out of his seat as Mr. Crouch passed by his cubicle.

"Ah," Mr. Crouch said. "Weatherby."

"Yes, sir?" He was too tired to protest the name.

"I wish to discuss this report with you," Mr. Crouch said, turning to walk back to his office. Percy quickly followed, stunned that Mr. Crouch had come personally to summon him. He discreetly dried himself off, though he left wet footprints on the floor.

Unlike the rest of their department, Mr. Crouch's office was pristine. Orderly. A perfect equation. Miss Jorkins was already there, a vague smile on her pleasant face.

"I must say," Mr. Crouch said, sitting down. Percy remained standing. "This is the best report I've seen from a junior secretary. I'm impressed—" he glanced down at the papers he held. "Weasley."

"Thank you, sir," Percy said. He had the ridiculous urge to bow.

"Twelve O.W.L.s," Mr. Crouch said, picking up another paper that looked disturbingly similar to Percy's application to the department. "Your father must be proud."

"I think so, sir," Percy said. He didn't know what his father thought about it. It was assumed Percy would do well in school, so when he did it was nothing noteworthy.

Mr. Crouch nodded to himself, picking up the cauldron report again. "Frankly, I'm tempted to present this to the Wizengamot as-is."

"There is room for improvement, Mr. Crouch," Percy said. He wasn't being modest, it was a simple fact. "I am not an expert in potioneering. I believe testimony from potioneers of renown would be beneficial. I would also like to explore the connection between the dwarf labor shortage and the copper market."

Mr. Crouch nodded to himself, smoothing his already straight moustache. "Excellent. I would like to see that." Mr. Crouch folded his hands together. "You are very thorough, Weasley. We need that in this department. You can see what happens when our standards are... substandard."

Percy nodded, just as another Howler went off.

"I'd like to see your additions by next week," Mr. Crouch said, taking out another stack of paper. "Now, regarding your proposal—"

“You read it?” Percy asked, wincing as he realized he had interrupted a department head.

Mr. Crouch gave him a faint smile. “I did. Though it is essential we do damage control, it was a timely reminder that our department cannot be brought to a standstill due to the despicable actions of the morally weak and cowardly.”

“You are absolutely right, Mr. Crouch.”

“I must say,” Mr. Crouch said, picking up the proposal Percy had written, which was nearly twice the length of the cauldron report. “You seem quite passionate about age restrictions.”

Percy felt queasy.

“He has younger brothers at Hogwarts,” Miss Jorkins suddenly said. “Twins.”

He cleared his throat. “While that is true, my younger brothers bear no influence on my opinion. Even if they were of age, I doubt either would be chosen.”

“They gave Ludo some sort of trick wand,” Miss Jorkins interjected. “He’s been going on about it all week!”

Percy took a moment to come to terms with his younger brothers being more popular in the Ministry than he was. “My main concerns are the imposition of our age of majority on an international event, restricting foreign candidates, and—”

“Yes, the hypothetical you presented,” Mr. Crouch said, turning a page. “Dumbledore suggested an age line, which does not take into consideration the specific date someone was born, just whether they are at least the age defined by the enchantment.”

“I agree with him, Barty,” Miss Jorkins said, sitting straighter. She smiled at Percy. “I took a peek at your report, love, I hope you don’t mind. How can we have all of the seventh years and *some* of the sixth years? It’s not fair on them! Either do all or none, not this wishy-washy tot. The headmaster’s just sent a letter about quidditch—”

Mr. Crouch frowned. “Quidditch would take focus from the tournament. I’ve explained this to Dumbledore, and both Karkaroff and Maxime agree!”

“Kids love quidditch,” Miss Jorkins said, baffled.

Mr. Crouch shook his head. “This is beside the point. The Goblet is indifferent to age, but *legally* one must be of age to enter into a contract. Younger students would need permission from their parents.”

Percy’s heart sank, but he had already known that. It was in his proposal. It was why his alternative was to restrict it to seventh-years.

“Must it be decided right now?” Percy asked. “I know the term begins soon, but the champion selection is not until Halloween.”

Miss Jorkins leaned forward, her eyes lighting up. “I heard that Madame Maxime was at the World Cup. I bet it left a bad impression.”

Mr. Crouch’s eyes grew distant. “Perhaps...yes...” He blinked a few times, then turned back to Percy. “You make a good argument, Weatherby. Arrangements are still being made, and I can see the other schools being amenable to this...Now,” Mr. Crouch said abruptly, opening a drawer. “Bertha’s intercepted an owl from one of our regulars, and I’d like to see how you would handle him. Have you heard of Mundungus Fletcher?”

Percy nodded absently, a bit let down at the change in subject. He could not fathom the utility of a tournament in which the best student was barred from competing, while an idiot like Diggory was eligible by the unfortunate circumstance of his birth. It was preposterous.

Harry doused the final Howler on his desk. It was his last day, a very long day. The office was nearly cleared out. While he was sick of the job, he would miss certain aspects of it. He hadn’t seen much of Percy since the World Cup, and when he did it was mostly in passing. Percy was busy.

Harry smiled to himself. For all that people complained about the Ministry, Percy was someone who actually did something about it.

He stood to leave, and bumped into a tall obstruction in flattering robes of dark blue.

“This is in violation of the Human and Non-human Resources Code of Ethics,” Percy said, pushing up his glasses.

“What is?”

Percy leaned down and kissed him. Harry grabbed fistfuls of his robes and pulled him closer, falling back into his chair. Percy stumbled. It couldn’t have been comfortable. It was a complete mess. They were right in the middle of the Portkey Office. He could hear Mr. Cram coughing up pieces of coleslaw.

Percy made a noise that eradicated every other thought in Harry’s mind. Then he pulled back, leaving Harry in disarray.

“I believe you have now been properly snogged in the office,” Percy said, his cheeks turning an appealing shade of pink. “It has been a pleasure working with you, Evans.”

He hurried away before Harry could respond.

Harry idly touched his lips. He was going to miss this stupid job.

It was the evening before the Hogwarts Express left, and Percy was spending it with his family. He would not be joining them at Kings Cross the next day. He had already said *goodbye* to Harry.

He touched his lips again. What had come over him?

“Do you know when your father is coming home?” his mother asked, looking worriedly at the family clock.

“No,” Percy said, slightly annoyed he had to stop thinking about Harry to answer. Mr. Crouch hadn’t followed up about his proposed changes to the Triwizard Tournament age requirements. It wasn’t an unreasonable suggestion. Miss Jorkins had got it right. Why some sixth-years, and not all? “It’s been nonstop Howlers all week. Just the other day Mundungus Fletcher claimed he had a twelve-bedroomed tent that the rioters blew up, when everyone knows he’d been sleeping under a cloak propped on sticks.”

His mother fretted. “He hasn’t had to work over the weekend since, well, since You-Know-Who! They’re working him far too hard!”

Percy sighed. No mention of how hard *he* had been working. “Part of the blame falls on him, for making a statement to the public without thinking it through. Half the Howlers are about that, even in my department.”

“Don’t you *dare* blame him for what that Skeeter woman wrote!” his mother snapped.

“I am not blaming him for what she wrote,” Percy started. “I’m—”

“If he hadn’t said anything, she would have gone off about the Ministry not making a statement,” Bill said. He moved another piece in his game of chess against Ron. Ron was winning. Hermione sat nearby, engrossed by a spellbook. Since Monty’s department, she had been more reticent.

“And the Ministry could have issued a statement in response to that,” Percy said. He was becoming frustrated. To be honest, he was already feeling frustrated. He decided he was done interacting with his family for the day. He didn’t need to compound the loss of Harry as a coworker, as someone who didn’t make him feel like he was slowly going insane, with being the family whipping boy.

He suppressed a smile as Bill brought up the Skeeter article in which she referred to him as a *long-haired pillock*. Harry had laughed so hard at that.

On the way to the stairs, he passed by Fred and George, who were whispering over a piece of parchment. Percy glanced at it, and saw it was addressed to one Ludo Bagman.

Frowning to himself, Percy walked up to his room. Miss Jorkins had mentioned the joke wands, which weren’t nearly as dangerous as the Ton-Tongue Toffees. It was the sort of thing

one could find in Zonko's. It wasn't a bad idea, if Bagman had a connection. They could start building a reputation.

Percy reached his room, closing the door. He relaxed immediately, pulling out the chair to his desk and sitting down. He had the beginnings of a letter, though he did not know when he would send it. It was raining out, and there was nothing urgent.

He picked up his pen, writing out his idle thoughts. It helped to get things down on parchment, however incriminating it was.

Percy watched the rain for some time. He liked the sound of it, how it drowned out the noise of the Burrow. It was peaceful.

"I'll go starkers before I put that on!"

Percy sighed as Ron and his mother got into a shouting match. Peace never lasted for long.

There was a scratching at his window. Monty leapt out of bed, hurrying over to let Benjy in. Benjy II, he reminded himself.

The little thestral had a scroll tied to his back. Monty quickly untied it, flicking drops of water off. He tried to open it, but there was a small explosion and something soft smacked him in the face.

Monty retrieved his glasses from the floor, as well as a snake cuddly toy that had wings stuck onto it. Monty stared dumbly at it.

"This...is not going to fool anyone," he said, picking up the parchment.

1. Put the bell on

2. Disillusion

3. Switch

4. Keep your cloak with you at all times. Ask Black to charm your pockets to carry it around

5. Keep occamy in pocket

Monty bowed his head over the parchment. It was never going to work.

Dark clouds, heavy with rain, churned above Cokeworth. A flash of light illuminated the back garden, and a clap of thunder rattled the panes of glass in the greenhouse. Harry splashed a foot in a puddle that was forming. It was possibly his last night as a human, if things went very wrong.

“I will go first,” his dad said, pulling a crystal phial from his robes. It shone with captured moonlight, even under the shroud of the storm. With his wand pointed at his chest, Harry’s dad recited, “*Amato animo animato animagus*,” for the last time, and downed the contents of the phial.

His dad made a pained expression, and then he began to change. Harry watched in awe as his dad shrank. And shrank. Was that a bad sign? He hadn’t expected his dad to be an elephant, or a whale, but his form was becoming quite small for a man who was so imposing in his everyday life.

When the transformation was finished, Harry was stunned to see a drab little bird where his dad used to be. A soaking wet drab little bird, who looked rather miffed. For a bird.

“I think you’re a hedge sparrow?” Harry said, not entirely certain. He’d seen similar birds around Cokeworth. “It’s cool that you’re a bird.”

Lady Madeleine, who had been sitting on the porch, meowed in agreement.

His dad appeared again, startling Harry.

“The potion is a success,” his dad said, not acknowledging that he could now turn into a bird. A cute little bird. “You may proceed.”

Harry gave his own phial a dubious look. He really didn’t want to be a slug. It would take forever to get around. Maybe his dad could carry him in his little bird claws?

“Cheers,” Harry said, downing the potion. It wasn’t the worst potion he had tasted. Knowing that it was mostly month-old spit didn’t make it any easier on the palate. He didn’t have time to dwell on the taste anyway, as he was changing.

He had read that the first transformation was the worst. His body was being rearranged. His bones, his muscles, his blood vessels, his eyes...he had to accept it. Rejecting his animagus form would kill him. It was so loud too, the lightning crackling above made his ears ring. Lady Madeleine’s claws scraping on the brick made him shudder. And the ground was very close. He hadn’t realized the puddles were deep enough to drown in.

“Meow!”

“I am not food!” Harry tried to say, but only chittering came out.

A giant of a man was bending down. Harry froze, not knowing what to do. He recognized the man. He knew his dad was tall, but this was ridiculous.

He was picked up. He decided to play dead.

He was carried inside, where it was warm and bright and dry, and he could smell the potions lab even from the living room. Harry began twitching, and he was let down.

Lady Madeleine was a giant. He froze as she sniffed him. When her examination was over, Harry tried to look at himself and ended up rolling around the floor.

He had a tail. A bushy, red tail. It was the same color as his mum’s hair.

All at once, Harry was a sixteen-year-old boy again, sprawled on the floor next to his cat. He pushed himself up, then stared at his hands. Human hands

Harry looked up at his dad, who had an expression Harry had never seen before.

“Your mother always did like squirrels.”

Severus took one look at his squirrel child riding around on his cat like a miniature jockey and left the room.

He went down to his lab. While the evening had been diverting, he needed to close up the lab for the school year, and prepare the more volatile concoctions for transportation.

He thought briefly of his own animagus form. A hedge sparrow. A dunnock. He crossed his arms, feeling almost indignant at the implication. The small birds were nearly impossible to see among the dull vegetation that choked the empty lots of Cokeworth. No one would associate such a creature with Severus Snape. Duplicious little birds.

What kind of spy was so ill-informed that he didn’t know what his former colleagues were planning? Why had he not been told of their plans at the Quidditch World Cup?

There was one thing Severus did know. Something that may have motivated someone like Lucius to act.

In the privacy of his lab, Severus pushed back his left sleeve. He exposed the mark that had faded so many years ago. It had never gone away. He hovered his hand above it, not daring to touch it directly. He would know. He always knew.

Severus knew what he would see, no matter how he wished to deny it.

It was darker.

The Dark Lord was returning.

Tongue-tied

Chapter Summary

September 1st, 1994

Chapter Notes

A [song](#) for a certain squirrel boy

Percy woke early, well before breakfast, to avoid having to eat with his family. Harry would no longer be available to provide muggle food, something which Percy should have been able to procure himself. Not while in school, obviously, not with his medication so readily available. He needed to take his health more seriously now that he was a member of the working class. The events of the Quidditch World Cup had exposed his carelessness, the consequences of his negligence.

As he passed through the kitchen, the hearth flared with green light.

“Percy, is that you?”

Percy’s eyelid twitched as he recognized the voice of Amos Diggory. He turned away from the door to see the man’s head sitting in the fireplace. It was as if no one had read his notice in the *Daily Prophet* on the dangers of Partial-Body Flooing. Mr. Diggory was lucky he hadn’t got his head torn off.

A pity.

“How may I help you?” Percy asked neutrally.

Mr. Diggory grimaced. “Bit of a cock-up on our hands. Could you get Arthur? He’ll be wanting to hear about this. Pronto.”

Percy withheld a sigh. “What has happened now?”

Sirius had been happy to charm Monty's pockets for him, when Monty told him what he wanted it for. One of the reasons, at least. Happily, Remus had already left for Hogwarts, needing to get his classroom ready for the year. Remus tended to be a bit more perceptive than Sirius, and much more keen on following the rules.

Monty's trunk was already packed, and organized as best he could manage. It was a spell Harry had taught him, and if Harry taught it to him it was worth learning. It made cleaning up loads easier, and he didn't have trouble finding things. Ron would chuck things into his trunk without looking, and would regularly complain about being unable to find something.

If Monty taught Ron the same spell, the Packing Charm, his friend wouldn't have so much trouble. He wouldn't even ask where Monty had learned it. But, it was special to him. A memory from the best summer holiday. It was selfish, but Monty wanted to keep the charm to himself.

The soft toy Harry had sent him lay motionless on his bed. He knew Harry was capable of making something more lifelike. He'd made Benjy II, after all. Monty carefully picked it up and touched the wings. It looked like Harry had made them out of parchment.

The wings lit up, a rainbow of colors as the small runes written on the paper flared to life. Monty tried to read them, but they were moving too fast, spreading across the parchment. There was a twitch, and the wings began to move.

Monty stared at the stuffed snake now flying around his room, bumping into walls. Hester hissed from her cage

"Sirius can't expect you to stay in a cage for an entire year," Monty hissed back. He quickly walked to her cage and picked it up. "Remember what I said."

Hester's tongue flicked out, her feather crest flat against her head. But she understood what he was doing, and curled up and went to sleep. It was hard to tell, given the lack of eyelids.

It was tricky, but Monty managed to get the entire cage into one of his robe pockets. Just in time, as Sirius was calling for him. It was time to leave for Kings Cross.

Lady Madeleine was draped over Harry's shoulders like a stole, claws sinking into his shirt so she would not be dislodged. They were outside of the Leaky Cauldron, Harry getting some last minute skateboarding in before he went back to school.

There hadn't been much time for it over the holiday, not as much as he would have liked. It was something the magical world didn't have. Flying on a broom was an alternative, but a broom, even his brother's, couldn't replace his skateboard.

It was raining, which wasn't great for his skateboard, but Harry was determined.

A driver laid on his horn, so Harry finally got out of the street and made his way to the station. His friends hadn't sent many letters since the World Cup. They thought he was a muggleborn. The dangers for him were more immediate. His Slytherin friends had magical ancestry far enough back to be considered purebloods, by and large. It wasn't something they talked about. As for what their families had done during the war, well, that was something they also didn't talk about.

Astrid's family had produced its fair share of dark witches and wizards throughout history, but weren't known for having blood purist ideals. Separationist, perhaps. Her mother's job was to keep the muggles ignorant, after all. From witches and wizards, but other magical peoples as well. Colleen Urquhart regularly had a selkie over for tea, and Astrid had never cared about his blood status. It didn't matter to her.

He could trust her, Terence, and Phoebe to not side with the Dark Lord. Phoebe was a half-blood, her grandfather being a muggle. In general, her family cared more about their broomstick business than politics. They would stay out of it, if they could. Same with Astrid's family, and Terence's. They had nothing to gain from joining Voldemort, and everything to lose if they opposed him. Even Terence's aunt on the Wizengamot was more of a moderate than anything. Roberta Higgs had been quoted in the *Prophet* describing the Werewolf Registry as *common sense*.

Cassius and Adrian were trickier. Cassius had to stop himself from calling Harry a mudblood a few times, but that was back in first year. He was too smart to genuinely believe in blood purity. Same with Adrian, when he finally grew out of the habit of repeating whatever his older relatives said. But when push came to shove, Harry didn't know what they would do. Whatever kept them alive, he imagined.

And then there was Jasmine's father, still in Azkaban.

It was something Harry had to think about, however much he didn't like the conclusions he came to. He couldn't pretend that his brother hadn't heard a prophecy foretelling the Dark Lord's return. He couldn't wave off the strange dreams, or the scar pain. He had seen the Death Eaters marching again.

One day, they would all have to make a choice.

When Kings Cross came into view, Harry kicked up his skateboard and shoved it into his bag. He mentally went through his itinerary. Make sure Monty was at the station, find his friends, get changed, prefect meeting, Welcoming Feast, bed. No dementors, no O.W.L.s. No Percy. There was the Triwizard Tournament, but according to his dad only people of age were allowed to enter. Just one of his friends would be old enough.

Harry smiled to himself as he heard the roar of a motorbike from above.

Percy had one goal in mind: get his family to Kings Cross as soon as possible.

“What are you doing?” his mother shrieked as the Ford Anglia took off into the open air. He gunned it for the clouds, checking the compass mounted on the dashboard. The Burrow became smaller and smaller beneath them, a magical patchwork in the middle of miles of countryside. When he punched the Invisibility Booster, they really started screaming. It was background noise to Percy, and easily ignored.

It was raining heavily, so he turned the windshield wipers on.

He was, in a word, annoyed. Amos Diggory had intercepted a missive for the Improper Use of Magic Office, regarding an incident which he wanted Percy’s father to smooth over. The Ministry didn’t need any more scandals, particularly not ones involving famous ex-aurors, possessed dustbins, and obliterated muggle police.

His father, who was meant to drive them all to Kings Cross, had left straightaway. Somehow it was Percy, not Bill or Charlie, who was conscripted to drive them all there. He simply did not have time to navigate muggle traffic. How would he deal with any muggles who saw nine people crammed into a sedan? There weren’t even enough seatbelts for them all. He’d have to call in Obliviators, or do it himself. It was simpler to avoid them entirely. If his father had a problem with him flying the car to Kings Cross, he should never have enchanted it with flight.

Percy was slightly mollified when he spotted Sirius Black’s motorbike already squeezing into a parking spot, the muggle cars around it leaping away to make room. He reached down and pulled one of the levers his father had added. He spotted a dark-haired teenager crossing the street and nearly clipped a building. Percy pulled back on the steering wheel, neatly landing in a parking spot that had just been vacated.

He turned the engine off, palmed the key, and got out of the car. He turned to see if his family was following, and saw most were struggling to find their invisible seatbelts. He reached in through the window and turned the Invisibility Booster off.

“Percy, what the hell was that?” Bill demanded, while Charlie helped their traumatized mother get out of the car.

“Punctuality,” Percy said crisply, watching as Harry neared. He walked past Monty Potter and Sirius Black without sparing them a glance. Percy frowned slightly. He knew that Harry was familiar with Black. He’d hidden the man inside of Hogwarts for months.

He smiled to himself when he noted how Harry was completely dry. Harry was too clever to get his wand snapped for underage magic. He wouldn’t go down without a fight. Percy would love to see him argue before the Wizengamot.

“Percival Septimus Weasley!” his mother snapped, slamming the car door. “Do you have *any* idea what sort of trouble your father would be in if someone saw us?”

“I do,” Percy said shortly, unlocking the trunk for his siblings. He looked at Harry again, who was watching the Weasleys with some amusement.

Harry winked. At Percy. He could have melted on the spot.

“I am perfectly aware of the laws applicable to this situation,” Percy managed to say. “I proofread them.”

“We will talk about this when we get home,” his mother seethed. “I cannot believe you, of all my children...”

Percy stopped paying attention. Harry was walking through the barrier. Percy was tempted to follow him, all the way onto the train. A stupid idea, worse than flying the car.

“Percy?”

He blinked, realizing that Charlie was next to him. He looked concerned. Ron and Hermione were hauling their trunks towards Monty. The twins were racing towards the barrier. His mother and Bill were helping Ginny and Mafalda. Ginny had spotted her muggleborn friend, Colin Creevey, and a smaller version of him. Another first-year, it seemed.

“Are you alright?” Charlie asked. “You know, I’ll be back soon. To help set up for you-know-what. Maybe we could—”

Percy shoved the key at his older brother. “I’m late for work.”

“You fuckfaces hear?” Adrian said, throwing himself onto a seat.

“Someone should wash your mouth out with soap,” Jasmine said, straightening the prefect badge on her robes. Harry had put his robes on over his muggle clothes, and pinned his own badges on. He didn’t think Astrid ever took off her captain badge, even over the holiday. It was much nicer than the gobstones one, which occasionally spewed.

Adrian lolled his tongue out.

“*Langlock*.”

Harry put his wand away while Adrian rolled around on the floor, clutching his throat

“I was going to use *scourgify*,” Astrid said darkly, fingering her wand.

“Never heard that spell before,” Terence said, lifting his legs out of the way, giving Adrian more thrashing room. “When did you pick that up?”

“Read it in a book,” Harry said. His dad’s old potions book was filled with ways to make his potions better, and his enemies’ lives worse. One spell description was simply *For Enemies*. His dad was so melodramatic.

“I hope you know the counter,” Phoebe said, scooting closer to Cassius. Cassius looked up from his book on ololygmancy, which depicted a howling dog on the cover, and occasionally barked.

“There isn’t a counter,” Harry said, smiling sweetly at Adrian. “It’ll wear off in about half an hour.”

“What is he trying to say?” Jasmine asked, frowning at Adrian. He seemed to have accepted his fate, climbing back into a seat.

Adrian held up three fingers, then flipped off Harry. The train whistled, and compartment doors were slamming shut.

Adrian started punching his hand, then held up three fingers again. Harry stared at him blankly.

“I like him like this,” Jasmine said, casually examining her nails.

“Is there really no counter?” Terence asked. “Bit harsh, Harry.”

“Technically, in the most technical sense, if we are speaking technically,” Harry said, “then yes. I could, technically, perform the counterjinx. Which I created, just so you know.”

“What does *technically* mean?” Phoebe whispered to Jasmine, who shrugged.

“No, let him keep trying,” Astrid said eagerly, grinning as Adrian continued to pantomime. “I want to see what he comes up with.”

“I believe he was asking if we, the fuckfaces, have heard about the Triwizard Tournament,” Cassius said, turning a page. It barked frantically at him. Cassius pursed his lips thoughtfully.

Adrian groaned, banging his head against his seat.

“Nice one, Cas,” Astrid said, hanging her head. “You’ve gone and fucked it up.”

“What is going on with you all?” Jasmine said, exasperated. “*Fuck this* and *fuck that*. What kind of example are you setting for the babies?”

“Babies?” Astrid asked. “The fuck are you on about?”

The train began to move. Adrian pushed the window open, hanging out of it while clutching his throat. Harry spotted Mr. Pucey placing a hand over his face.

“Get out of the way, you twat,” Astrid said, pulling him back so she could wave goodbye to her family.

Harry had no one to see him off, but he was dragged over to be waved at by his friends’ families.

“We’ve got to get to the prefect’s carriage,” he said, wiping off his cheek. Mhairi had blown kisses at them, which her magic had helped make reality. Harry had never seen or heard of such a thing, but accidental magic was strange. He hadn’t got out of the way fast enough.

“Are you going to leave him like that?” Phoebe asked, gesturing wildly at Adrian, who had given up on the pantomime and was now scribbling messages on the compartment walls.

Harry sighed, taking his wand out again.

Monty waved at Sirius as the train pulled out of the station, his heart pounding so hard it made him dizzy. He did it. He had actually got Hester onto the train. He barely paid attention to whatever Ron and the others were going on about, the thing that was happening at Hogwarts that year. Monty had more immediate concerns, like the juvenile occamy in his pocket.

“Did any of you see Luna?” he asked. Luna stood out in a crowd, but the platform was packed and the rain was coming down in sheets. He did see her father, holding a large leaf over his head and looking somewhat lost.

No one responded, too busy shouting at Ron’s mum and older brothers, demanding answers. Monty sighed, then followed Ron and Hermione to a compartment. He would see Luna later. He couldn’t wait for her to meet his newest friend.

Harry finished drying off the second-years, then joined his friends at the Slytherin table. He was glad the storm had passed through Cokeworth on its way north, otherwise he’d be doing his first transformation on the school’s front lawn. Watching the storm through the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall was fascinating. The clouds looked close enough to touch. He wondered if any creatures lived up there, chasing lightning bolts.

The train ride had felt longer than usual. People were still talking about the Quidditch World Cup, the game itself and not the nightmare it had later become. The students who knew about the Triwizard Tournament were having fun messing with those who didn’t. Harry had even witnessed Ron Weasley break the glass out of a door in his frustration. Something Draco Malfoy had said, given Harry had seen the boy scurrying away. Monty had given him an apologetic look, quickly repairing the broken window.

Harry glanced at the head table. His dad had his hands folded, glaring out at the students. Professor Burbage beamed at his side. Lupin had returned, which caused a stir. The Defense curse, it seemed, was broken. Harry didn’t particularly like Lupin, but he could admit Lupin

was a good teacher. They wouldn't have to deal with a fraud like Lockhart, or another Ministry hack.

As he turned back to his friends, something gave Harry pause. It made his skin crawl.

The headmaster was looking at him.

Harry smiled vaguely, resisting the urge to look to his dad for help. Albus Dumbledore was not a stupid man. He was old, he was powerful, had a number of academic and magical achievements over the past century, had many friends on the Wizengamot and among the magical elite. And, somehow, Harry had attracted his interest.

He nudged Astrid, said something about how he had met Viktor Krum. She began shouting, physically trying to shake answers out of him, only stopping when the doors to the Great Hall opened. The first-years had arrived.

Harry didn't hear a word of the Hat's song. His dad had warned him about the headmaster's interest, when he was a third-year. And what had Harry done? Confronted a basilisk. Rescued Sirius Black. Two things that directly impacted his brother, even though there was no way the headmaster could know Monty was a parselmouth.

Deep in thought, Harry missed the name of the first kid sorted, clapping when everyone else clapped. The headmaster looking at him would only bother Harry if he had something to hide. He had to act like nothing had happened.

"Baddock, Malcolm!"

Harry smiled and clapped more enthusiastically when the Sorting Hat called out "Slytherin!" On the other side of the hall, he heard some Gryffindors hissing and booing. Harry stared at Fred and George Weasley, who snapped their mouths shut when they noticed.

The first-years wouldn't be Harry's problem that year, given the new fifth-year prefects. Flora Carrow, not on the gobstones team, and Killian Avery, on the gobstones team. One of the other stoners, Bridget Pritchard, had a little brother starting at Hogwarts. Harry wasn't that invested in which first-year went where, barring one.

"Prewett, Mafalda!"

From what Harry knew about Mafalda, she hadn't had the best introduction to the magical world. She had been rejected by her parents, accidentally pranked by the twins, and had been caught in the middle of a Death Eater riot. He wouldn't have been surprised if she refused to go to Hogwarts, but having magic made up for a lot of things.

The Weasleys waited expectantly at the Gryffindor table while Mafalda resolutely put on the Sorting Hat.

The Hat didn't hesitate.

"Slytherin!"

The applause was scattered. Prewett was a known name. Her relation to the Weasley family was obvious; Mafalda had spent the train ride with her cousins. Those same Weasleys were floundering, having just booed other first-years sorted into Slytherin.

Mafalda was stuck in the middle of the Great Hall, a stricken expression on her pallid face.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Harry muttered, standing up.

“What are you doing?” Astrid hissed.

Harry began clapping. And chanting. He’d been to enough quidditch games to know how to rile a crowd, and he vividly remembered how Fred and George had reacted to his brother’s sorting.

“We got Prewett,” he said, smiling at the scared little girl. “We got Prewett.”

Maybe it was because he was a prefect, or that gobstones loyalty ran deep, but Harry was relieved when his housemates finally joined.

“We got Prewett! We got Prewett!”

Of course, when Bridget’s brother Graham was sorted into Slytherin, they had to do it again. But Mafalda was smiling, and talking to the other firsties. It was worth making a fool of himself.

“I can’t believe she’s in Slytherin,” Ron said through a mouthful of mashed potato.

Monty scooted away from him. He was perfectly aware that people conflated Slytherin with dark witches and wizards, but there were nice kids in Slytherin.

“I can,” Ginny said airily, piling chicken wings on her plate. “You just haven’t spent enough time with Mafalda.”

Ron grunted in response and continued eating.

Monty returned to his own food, sneaking glances at the Slytherin table. Harry and the other sixth-year prefect, a pretty girl named Rookwood, had moved down the table to sit with the first-years. Harry flicked a Yorkshire pudding. It grew legs and a head, a tail and a flowing mane. It was a small Yorkshire pudding horse, and it pranced down the table. Mafalda started laughing, and fed the charmed horse some of her peas.

He looked down at his plate, taking a deep breath. It was stupid to feel jealous of that. He would have been miserable in Slytherin, with Malfoy and them. He was glad he was in Gryffindor. He reached into his robes, brushing the top of the cage. He’d have to let Hester

out to hunt, to stretch her wings. To everyone else, it would look like he had an empty cage next to his bed.

Monty shook his leg impatiently as the meal dragged on. He normally enjoyed the Welcoming Feast, but he felt like a mess.

“Did I tell you,” Neville said from across the table. “Someone at the Ministry found my wand!”

Monty smiled at him, nodding along as Neville talked about the letter he had got.

Eventually, the food was eaten, the plates were cleared, and Dumbledore was making his start-of-term announcements. Filch had banned some new products, the Forbidden Forest was forbidden, Hogsmeade was out-of-bounds for anyone below third year. Monty glanced at the Ravenclaw table, where Luna had materialized. She’d be able to go to Hogsmeade without sneaking through a tunnel. And Sirius had sent in a new signed permission form for Monty.

“I must also inform you,” the headmaster said, “that there will be some changes to the quidditch schedule.”

There was some murmuring at this, and Monty exchanged a look with Ron.

“What changes?” Fred demanded.

“The following club events will also be rescheduled from previous years,” the headmaster continued. “The Gobstones Tournament, the Exploding Snap Exposition, the Frog Choir Recital, the Charms Exhibition, the Wizard Chess Championships...”

Monty started to lose interest by the time Dumbledore got to the Chocolate Frog Collectible Card Game Extravaganza. Ron started to nod off.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Your heads of house will announce the adjusted dates for each event. Now, as to why we have rearranged your various club activities. It is my pleasure to announce that Hogwarts will be hosting the Triwizard Tournament this year!”

Scent of a Weasel

Chapter Summary

September 1994

The Burrow felt strangely empty. Bill and Charlie had returned abroad, the others were at Hogwarts. It was only Percy and his parents. He had never had his parents to himself before. He was tentatively looking forward to spending more time with them. Maybe they could get through a conversation, without the twins causing an explosion or Ron and Ginny fighting over something.

He was alone with his parents. That meant his mother had no one else to focus her attention on.

It was quiet, without so much as the ghoul rattling the pipes. Percy crept downstairs, his anxiety growing. What would they even talk about? There were conversations Percy knew they ought to have. About his dietary needs, about his...about Harry. Rather, why he would choose someone like Harry over Penelope Clearwater.

The thought of introducing either topic made him nauseated. He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to deal with the fallout of either conversation. It was easier to act like everything was business as usual, to maintain the status quo. His mother would prefer it.

Since she had far fewer to cook for, his mother was not yet up. The kitchen was empty. Percy cautiously looked around, then pulled an apple out of his pocket. It had a sticker on it. He had never seen an apple with a sticker on it. The display in the shop he had visited after work said it was a recently discovered variety. The Red Prince.

Percy peeled the sticker off. It was damning evidence of the apple's muggle origins. It was a beautiful apple. Deep red skin, crisp white flesh, surprisingly fragrant. Percy had never considered the smell of apples before.

The *Daily Prophet* arrived as Percy ate his feast of a single apple and a mug of instant coffee.

FURTHER MISTAKES AT THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

Percy choked on a piece of apple.

Harry stared at the picture of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley in the *Daily Prophet*, smiling and waving from the Burrow's garden. He glanced at the Gryffindor table, but they were blissfully unaware of Rita Skeeter's latest article. He knew Percy must have already seen it, seen his dad mistakenly called *Arnold Weasley*. Harry was fairly certain Skeeter had attended Hogwarts with Mr. Weasley, not to mention how well-known he was. He doubted the misnaming was an innocent mistake.

What bothered him, and what he knew would set Percy off, was that the article described a fairly typical event in Mr. Weasley's day-to-day. Some enchanted muggle artifacts gone wild, ensuring the muggles were none the wiser. It wasn't a *mistake*. It was Mr. Weasley doing his job. Of course, no one would think that after having read the article.

He put his paper away, knowing there was nothing he could do about it. Half of magical Britain was already reading about *highly aggressive dustbins*, another false alarm by Mad-Eye Moody, an *undignified and potentially embarrassing scene*.

It had not been *potentially embarrassing* until Skeeter put that thought into the world. Harry normally got a laugh out of her articles, seeing through the hyperbole, but knew that many, far too many, took Skeeter at face value.

"Are you going forward with all of your classes?" Cassius asked.

Harry hadn't noticed him sitting down, nor the rest of his friends, and was surprised to see the Great Hall had gradually filled around him. The first-years were already being herded in by Flora and Killian. He had been too intent on the article. Would the headmaster notice that? Assume he had an unusual interest in the Weasley family? Another connection to Monty Potter.

"Yeah," Harry said. He had to act normal. Everything was normal. "I meant to ask, how did you do on your O.W.L.s?"

Of his Slytherin friends, Cassius and Jasmine were the most academically inclined. Cassius, in particular, studied harder than most.

"Adequate," Cassius said. "Os and EEs."

"Did you get an O in Potions?" Harry asked. It was the only N.E.W.T. class that required an O, and one of the more challenging O.W.L.s.

"I did," Cassius said, "but I'm dropping it. History of Magic is going to be a bear this year."

Harry nodded, not surprised. His dad was not the easiest teacher.

"Well, *I'm* not," Jasmine said, watching as Harry's dad—he would have to start thinking of him as Professor Snape again—made his descent from the head table, armed with their schedules. "Not after all the work I've put in to get that bloody O."

“What is with this language?” Adrian wailed, covering his ears.

“I can’t do it anymore,” Terence said, shaking his head. “You haven’t had him as a partner for five years,” he said, pointing accusingly at Harry. “*It says super fine powder, not fine powder. You’re meant to juice the bouncing spiders, not pulp them.*”

Harry gave him a flat look. “Excuse me for having high expectations. Which you met, by the way. And what about him?” he said, gesturing at Cassius. “You’re with him in Divination. The man’s obsessed! Are you saying he’s not double checking the aspect of Uranus?”

“While I am sure this is a *fascinating* conversation,” a deep, derisive voice said behind him, “I am afraid I must interrupt. I trust you all have copies of your O.W.L.s and your N.E.W.T. applications?”

Harry, a natural occlumens, showed no reaction as he handed his dad the asked for papers.

“Weasley!”

Percy didn’t respond immediately, not used to hearing his name while at work. Even Mr. Jordan called him Weatherby for a laugh. He might as well change his name to Weatherby, if his father continued getting bad press.

“Weasley.”

Percy leapt out of his chair. It was Mr. Crouch, regarding him impassively.

“Mr. Crouch, good morning,” Percy said. “I’ve received a response from Ceridwen’s Cauldrons. They are resellers, primarily supplying Hogsmeade and Hogwarts.”

Mr. Crouch nodded. “Good choice, Weasley. I imagine they sell quite a few cauldrons.”

“Yes,” Percy said emphatically. “I was hoping to interview the owners in person. See how their sales have fluctuated over the years.”

“Excellent,” Mr. Crouch said. “I look forward to seeing the result. Now,” he said, sitting down in the other chair Percy had. Harry’s chair. Percy didn’t dwell on it, quickly returning to his own seat. “As I’m sure you have seen, there was a bit of an incident yesterday morning.”

Percy went rigid. Was he getting sacked because his father was an indiscreet buffoon?

“While this reflects poorly on the Ministry,” Mr. Crouch continued, “I will not punish the son for the sins of his father. Public criticism is part and parcel of being a Ministry employee.”

It took a moment for Percy to compose a response. While the article had been unflattering, it had also been fallacious. His father could have handled the Moody kerfuffle better, true, but

he had just been woken up and raced to the scene. He had done an admirable job, even if it had somehow leaked.

“I don’t think my father did anything wrong,” Percy said. “The article misconstrued a rather mundane event. In my opinion, sir.”

Mr. Crouch smiled faintly. “Nevertheless, I trust this will not impact your performance.”

“Of course not, sir!” Percy said, a little loudly. “There is far too much work to be done.”

After some more discussion about Percy’s current projects, Mr. Crouch stood to leave. “Bertha’s out sick today, so if you have any questions you can bring them to me directly.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Crouch,” Percy said, stunned by the offer. “Thank you.”

Skrewts were on the mind as Monty walked to the North Tower for double Divination. Malfoy had asked, rudely, what the point of the blast-ended skrewts was. What their use was. Monty was dead curious about that too, though he wouldn’t have said so to Hagrid’s face. In his opinion, the skrewts were interesting in their own right. Their arses exploded.

Would Luna like a skrewt of her own? They were something entirely new to the world, if Monty had read Hagrid correctly. They were, for the time being, at a fairly cute size. Just hatched, about as big as his hand. That was true of his occamy, sometimes. She could change her size at will, though Monty was trying to train her on *when* to change size. He feared the day she realized she could shrink small enough to fit through the bars on Hedwig’s old cage. He’d have a microscopic occamy.

Hermione had said something over lunch that bothered Monty. That the skrewts should be *stamped out*, before they started attacking people. He remembered over the holiday hearing something similar about vampires. Sirius and Remus—Professor Lupin—had discussed it. And while skrewts weren’t people like vampires were, as far as Monty knew, eradicating an entire species simply because they *might* be dangerous sat wrong with him.

The Divination classroom was as hot and smoky as he remembered, but Monty was prepared. He’d seen Sirius do his spell to get rid of smoke dozens of times. There would be nothing clogging Monty’s inner eye that year.

Sinking down into a chintz armchair, Monty pulled out his wand and murmured, “*Tortaventum*.”

“What was that?” Ron asked, sitting across from him.

“A spell Sirius taught me,” Monty said, casting it for Ron as well.

“He let you do magic at his house?”

Monty was saved from answering when Professor Trelawney appeared behind him. She seemed to have grown even more mystifying over the holiday, as evidenced by the increased number of shawls she wore.

“It seems you are preoccupied, my dear,” she said, giving his wand a significant look, her typically misty eyes magnified by her glasses. Monty quickly put it away. Professor Trelawney leaned closer. “I am afraid your worries are not baseless. I See difficult times ahead for you...”

Monty’s eyebrows shot up. Had she remembered the prophecy she made?

“I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass...”

He glanced at Ron, who rolled his eyes. Knowing that Professor Trelawney actually possessed some Seer ability, Monty wasn’t as skeptical. The thing he dreaded...Sirius finding out about the fake Hester?

Professor Trelawney pulled back, having delivered her cryptic message. Monty knew she could have been putting it on, but even that could be influenced by her Seer heritage. Any random things she said had a higher likelihood of being true, without even Professor Trelawney knowing.

“My dears,” she intoned, having delivered her ominous prediction for the day, “it is time for us to consider the stars...”

Monty’s mood picked up when he saw they were doing their birth charts. They had done star charts in Astronomy the year before, which he thought was fun. It was like solving a puzzle, figuring out which planet was where on a given date, at a specific time. He was a Leo, which he knew even before starting Hogwarts. Out of curiosity, he looked up Harry’s Zodiac sign.

He snorted when he found it. Harry was a Cancer. Karkinos, the Crab.

Smiling to himself, Monty started calculating his moon sign.

Harry got a start on his Ancient Runes essay as he waited for Defense to begin. While the class sizes shrank in sixth year, people not getting the required O.W.L. or simply losing interest, nearly everyone continued in Defense. Fred Weasley had notably been absent in Ancient Runes. Harry knew why, thanks to Percy. Fred had got a Dreadful on his Runes O.W.L. He also knew George had got one on his Arithmancy O.W.L. He would only see them both in Defense and Charms, and one each in Herbology and Transfiguration.

He suppressed a grin as the twins entered the class room, the last to arrive.

Professor Lupin smiled at them from the front of the classroom. Harry liked it far better than previous years. One of the aurors had put graphic posters on the walls, depictions of curses in

action. Lockhart had put himself everywhere. Professor Lupin was practical. A few dark creatures for the lower years to study, some tools of the trade—dark detectors, probes, foe glasses—so they could analyze their utility. Supplementary books on jinxes, hexes, and curses. A syllabus.

“It’s good to see you all again,” Professor Lupin said. “Each one of you performed admirably on your Defense O.W.L., which is why you are sitting in this classroom today. Now, this year we will be studying more advanced defensive spells, with a focus on shields and other protective charms.”

A piece of chalk wrote down Professor Lupin’s points on the board as he spoke. Harry needed to learn that spell.

“As for creatures, we will be covering spirits. We have already studied several, such as boggarts, and we all have personal experience with dementors,” Professor Lupin added wryly. “Our studies will encompass both corporeal spirits and noncorporeal spirits. Creatures native to our region—banshees, for example—and creatures created via dark magics, such as inferi.”

Adrian raised his hand.

“Yes, Adrian?”

“What about basilisks?” he asked innocently.

“Basilisks are not classified as *spirits*,” Professor Lupin said. “Are there any other questions? No? Excellent! Now, this week we shall be reviewing the material presented on your O.W.L.s. With a twist!” he added over the Gryffindors’ complaints. “Sixth year is when you begin learning nonverbal magic, in *all* of your classes. It is expected you can perform at least basic tasks without shouting the incantation. You’ll be working in pairs, casting and blocking jinxes without speaking. Now, we’ve got an odd number of students, let me think...Alicia, you pair with Astrid. Kenneth, you’re with Terence. Mr. Pucey, I think it’s safer for you to make an attempt against me before I set you loose upon your classmates...”

Harry smiled at Fred Weasley as he reluctantly stood to face him. He glanced at Jasmine, who was staring daggers at George. Astrid looked like she was going to rip poor Alicia Spinnet’s throat out.

Fred cleared his throat. “We blew the cake up on purpose.”

“You think that will save you?” Harry asked softly. Percy had told him the twins knew. Harry didn’t care.

“It was in poor taste,” Jasmine said icily. “Booing our first-years.”

“It was a joke,” George said. “All in good fun, right mates?”

“So it’s funny to make little kids cry?” Harry asked.

“McGonagall already took points off,” Fred protested.

“Alright, is everyone in position?” Professor Lupin called out. “Remember, jinxes *only*. If I see so much as a hex cast, you will be spending tonight with Mr. Filch.”

“Ooer,” Phoebe said, smiling at poor Lee Jordan, who had joined the twins in their heckling the night before.

“You can go first,” Harry offered to a heavily sweating Fred. “Go on, Manfred. Try to jinx me.”

Hours later, while walking with Jasmine and Adrian to Potions—how Adrian had scraped an O, Harry had no idea—he spotted Fred and George wobbling up the grand staircase, unable to shake off the fairly harmless Jelly-Legs Jinx Harry had hit them both with. Nonverbal magic was second nature to Harry. He’d been doing it since before Hogwarts. It had been an otherwise uneventful class, as his classmates strained to make anything happen. Adrian had strained so hard he farted.

“You going to enter?” Adrian asked as they walked through the dungeons.

“My mum probably wouldn’t let me,” Jasmine said indifferently. “It takes ages to get owls from her anyway.”

“What about you, Haz?” Adrian asked, slinging an arm over his shoulders. “Fame, glory, galleons?”

He *had* thought about it, briefly, when the headmaster said the Triwizard Tournament would be open to all seventh-years, and sixth-years with the consent of their guardians. It was different from what his dad had told him, though not entirely surprising given some sixth-years would be of age by the time the champion selection came around.

“Who would I get permission from?” Harry asked quietly.

“Oh, right,” Adrian said apologetically, releasing him. “You could ask Snape? I thought he signed your Hogsmeade form.”

“That’s not the same thing as entering a deadly tournament,” Jasmine pointed out. “Harry’s not likely to get gored by a nundu whilst going round Honeydukes.”

The thing was, he could get permission from his dad. Harry wasn’t the only orphan at Hogwarts, though most lived with their extended families. There wasn’t any precedent for the Triwizard Tournament being age restricted. It had been open to all, when it was still regularly held several centuries ago.

It was tempting to enter. Not only for the money, but for the challenge of it. If Harry was anyone else, he would have been banging down Professor Snape’s door for his permission. But the Triwizard Tournament was a big event. An international event, though it only

concerned the three major European schools. There would be articles about the champions. He had already attracted too much attention for his various exploits. Being a Triwizard Champion was too much visibility for Harry Evans.

“We could always crash it,” Harry offered as they made it to the potions lab. “Or, better yet, if one of us makes it, we can help them out.”

Jasmine cooed at him. “You’re such a sweetheart.”

Harry rolled his eyes and opened the door to the potions classroom. He immediately slammed it shut.

“What’d you do that for?” Adrian demanded.

“I can’t believe he’s done this,” Harry said.

“Done what?” Jasmine asked. “If you aren’t going in, I will. I don’t want points taken off for being tardy. We’re prefects, Harry, honestly!”

Harry sighed, but opened the door again.

Professor Snape was in front of his desk, standing next to a vat filled with a beautifully brewed potion. It was the color of mother-of-pearl, scintillating with its own light. Everyone, except for Harry and his dad, was staring at it. He had to prod Jasmine and Adrian to their seats, while overcoming his own reaction to the scent assaulting him. It was torturous.

There weren’t many students who continued on to N.E.W.T. Potions. Only those who wanted to become aurors, healers, or potioners. Jasmine seemed to be taking it out of spite. And there was Harry, who wanted to take it because his mum and dad had both excelled in the subject. And his dad taught the class. He was biased.

For some godforsaken reason, Cedric Diggory was also taking N.E.W.T. Potions. He was too busy drooling over the cauldron brimming with Amortentia to notice Harry. Harry gave his dad a dirty look, then looked around at the rest of the class. Angelina and Alicia from Gryffindor. Amina Randle, who was on the Ravenclaw gobstones team, and Marcus Turner, a Ravenclaw prefect.

“Can anyone sense tell me what this potion is?” Professor Snape asked without preamble.

Harry raised his hand, the only one capable of paying attention.

Parchment. Ink. Sunshine. Something else, precious and rare, he could never define, could never forget. He knew it would stick with him for days. Weeks. Months.

His dad smirked at him. He was the absolute worst.

Harry hoped his dad would choke on the pristine Draught of Living Death he had brewed. He understood *why* his dad had begun with a demonstration. Amortentia was incredibly dangerous, as were all of the potions they would be studying at the N.E.W.T. level. Potions which influenced the mind, potions that didn't need to be imbibed to be effective. The mere vapor of Amortentia had turned his classmates into drooling idiots.

Percy had brewed Amortentia. What had he smelled?

Scowling, Harry followed his friends up the stairs leading to the entrance hall.

"Weasley! Hey, Weasley!"

Harry suppressed a groan. Would he be allowed to stop thinking about Percy? It was Weasleys from dawn to dusk. He couldn't get a break.

"Your dad's in the paper!"

Harry stepped into the entrance hall and spotted Draco Malfoy waving around that morning's *Daily Prophet*. It had brought the migration to dinner to a standstill. The entrance hall was packed with students waiting for the show to start.

"For fuck's sake," Harry muttered as Draco started to read from the article. "*Accio!*"

The paper was torn out of Draco's hands. He yelped in surprise, spinning around to see who had done it.

Harry snatched the paper out of the air.

"Evans!" Draco said. "How dare you—"

"You're blocking the Great Hall, Malfoy," Harry said, walking through the crowd to confront the boy. He scanned the onlookers. "Get to your house tables, all of you."

"But—"

"Now," Harry said, crossing his arms.

Draco glowered at him, then stormed off, shoving aside a few second-years who were gawking at Harry.

"You heard Evans," Professor McGonagall snapped. Harry looked over his shoulder and saw her walking down the grand staircase, laden with books. "Into the Great Hall, move along!"

Harry spotted his brother edging towards him through the crowd, which had finally started moving again. Rolling his eyes, he tossed the paper to Monty.

"Bad mood, Haz?" Adrian asked, bumping into him.

"Was it Diggory?" Jasmine asked in a low tone. "My mum's taught me a few spells to deal with...his kind."

“What kind is that?” Harry asked as they walked to their own table. The first-years were already there, and little Mafalda Prewett was watching him with big eyes. He smiled at her, then went to sit with his friends.

Harry glanced at Mafalda again, then he went completely still.

He had the perfect cover story if the headmaster came sniffing around. It was even more perfect because it was *true*.

Candy from a Baby

Chapter Summary

September 1994

Had Monty got started on his Divination homework—a daily analysis of how the planetary movements would affect him for the next month, based on his birth chart—he would have known it was going to be a rough first week.

The second day of school started rather innocuously in double Potions. Neville had managed to melt a staggering five cauldrons while attempting to brew a Wit-Sharpening Potion.

“You keep using too much armadillo bile,” Monty whispered, while Neville hyperventilated. “When you get to that part, let me do it.”

“Mr. Longbottom,” Professor Snape said, startling Neville so badly he dropped the entire bottle of armadillo bile into his sixth cauldron. They watched the cauldron melt, starting from the bottom. Professor Snape closed his eyes while Neville began to silently weep.

“I was going to inform you that there is not enough time left in class to restart your potion,” Professor Snape said, watching the botched, bubbling potion spread across the worktable.

“You will return during your free period to continue working on the potion, and this time you will use one of the school’s cauldrons. I have personally ensured the integrity of the vessels.”

“Yes, sir,” Neville stuttered. Monty grabbed his bile-coated hand before he wiped his eyes.

Monty had already finished his own potion, and the sample was safely on Professor Snape’s desk. He had been helping Neville work on his own, but his friend was already feeling overwhelmed by their first homework assignments. Monty took a moment to be annoyed with his Divination classmates. If they hadn’t been messing around, Professor Trelawney wouldn’t have given them such a difficult assignment. Well, it was difficult for those who hadn’t been paying attention in class. Ron, for example.

The bell rang, and the class began packing up. Neville gave the mess in front of him a devastated look.

“I can help you clean up,” Monty offered. He could try out some cleaning charms he’d read about.

Professor Snape sighed. “What are your next classes?”

“Muggle Studies,” Monty said. “Neville too.”

Professor Snape's expression hardened. "So you seek to not only waste my instructional time, but Professor Burbage's?"

"No," Monty said hastily. "I—"

"Leave it, Potter," Professor Snape said. "Longbottom, wash your hands with the bicarb. It will neutralize the bile."

"Yes, sir," Neville said, almost falling off of his stool to get to the sinks.

With a wave of his wand, Professor Snape vanished the mess, cauldron and all.

"What spell is that?" Monty asked. "I've seen you vanish things loads of times."

Professor Snape raised an eyebrow.

"Sir," Monty added.

"It is the aptly named Vanishing Spell," Professor Snape said evenly. "A fifth-year transfiguration spell. The theory behind it is complex. The transfiguration is not from one state of being to another, as with inanimate to inanimate. It is from being to non-being. As I recall, Professor McGonagall spends several months preparing the class before even mentioning the incantation. Mastering vanishment lays the foundation for conjuration. They are inverses."

Monty's mouth was hanging open. He had heard Sirius make jokes about Harry being similar to Professor Snape, which he never took seriously. But Harry talked *exactly* like that sometimes. It was surreal.

"You looked like a fish, Potter," Professor Snape said, turning away and walking back to his desk. "Help Longbottom finish packing. If I hear that either of you arrived late to your next class, it will be detention."

Monty made it to Muggle Studies in record time, hauling Neville behind him. It was lucky the classroom was on the first floor, otherwise they never would have made it. The bell rang just as they joined Hermione in the front row.

Professor Burbage was already there. Normally, she was a very cheerful person. She wore bright colors, she smiled a lot, and genuinely seemed to enjoy teaching. But that day, their first Muggle Studies class of the year, she had a somber appearance. She was wearing muggle clothes, a pair of old overalls with a plain shirt underneath, grass-stained boots that still had dirt clinging onto them. She looked like a muggle farmer.

"My parents are farmers," Professor Burbage said, shutting the door with a wave of her hand. "I grew up on a farm, until I got my Hogwarts letter. The same farm my mother grew up on, and her father, and his father, for generations. My parents had to auction some of the best of our flock to afford my school supplies. The exchange rate was worse back then, on our side. The muggle side. Sixty-seven pounds to the galleon. Now the galleon is weaker, so getting *out* of the magical world is harder than getting in. Why do you think that is? Yes, Granger?"

Hermione lowered her hand. “The war?”

“Yes,” Professor Burbage said shortly. “We call it the First Wizarding War as it was the first internecine war among the British magical community. That means we were killing each other, Bulstrode,” she added, glancing at the Slytherin girl raising her hand. “The exchange rate tanked as animosity towards muggles and muggleborns rose.”

A paper flew off of her desk, a page from the *Daily Prophet*, a photograph Monty had seen every day for the past week. Had it only been a week? Professor Burbage pointed her wand at the picture of the Dark Mark, enlarging it for the entire room to see.

“The sheep industry isn’t doing so well,” Professor Burbage continued. “It’s barely worth the cost to shear them as the demand for wool has decreased, as has the market for lamb. Still, it is more profitable to sell the lambs for meat than to raise them for wool, and the price for wool is plummeting. I’ve done the arithmancy. My parents might have to sell our land.”

Professor Burbage closed her eyes, took a deep breath. “This,” she said, pointing at the Dark Mark, “is why I am a professor. It could have been my family up there. It nearly was, fifteen years ago, but I was smart. I hid them.”

Monty glanced at Neville and Hermione, who for once wasn’t frantically taking notes.

“Now,” Professor Burbage said, looking around the room. “How many of you were at the Quidditch World Cup?”

Monty raised his hand, as did nearly everyone else. Professor Burbage nodded.

“Normally, conflicts in the muggle world, at the intersection of our worlds, would not be discussed until your fifth year,” Professor Burbage said. “Given recent events, I have adjusted the curriculum. For the next month, we will discuss events leading up to the Quidditch World Cup, the game itself, and the aftermath.”

Monty opened his notebook, writing down their assignment for the week. Writing about their experience at the Quidditch World Cup, and what they felt about it. He had seen the Death Eaters marching, but what Monty remembered most was the expression on Harry’s face just before he was apparated away.

Severus kept one eye on Longbottom as he meticulously made his seventh attempt at brewing the Wit-Sharpening Potion. It wasn’t a particularly difficult potion, and Severus had chosen it specifically as a test to see what his students had retained over the summer.

His son had, at length, discussed the state of cauldron bottoms. Normally, he would have dismissed Longbottom as simply inept, but witnessing *six* cauldrons melt had forced Severus to reconsider. It was abnormal, to say the least.

As Longbottom was not himself melting, and the cauldron Severus had provided was functioning properly, he returned to the headmaster's latest *fun little project*. Rescheduling several dozen club events. McGonagall, thankfully, had taken it upon herself to handle the quidditch schedule. Sprout had been cagey about gobstones. Everything had to be fit between the Triwizard Tournament tasks, Hogsmeade visits, exams, O.W.L.s, N.E.W.T.s, prefect meetings, staff meetings, holidays...

There were only so many weekends.

"Professor?"

Snape looked up from the calendar and saw Longbottom holding a vial of bright purple potion. He was tempted to tell the boy to drink it.

"Place it on my desk, then leave," Severus said. He looked down at the calendar for September, frowning at the newest addition in McGonagall's handwriting. On her head be it. When he heard no movement from Longbottom, he looked up again.

"What?" he asked the boy.

Longbottom's lip quivered, but he straightened his back and said, "Thank you for letting me try again, sir."

"It is for my sake as much as your own," Severus said. "I don't care to see my classroom and equipment destroyed by incompetence."

"Right," Longbottom said, finally placing the vial on his desk. When Longbottom was gone, Severus glanced at it. Instead of grading his students' work, he was acting as the headmaster's secretary. He didn't know which was worse.

Astrid ran into the Great Hall halfway through dinner, a murderous look on her face. She slammed the parchment she held onto the table.

"Look at this," she said, breathing heavily. "I've just been to see McGonagall. Our first game was moved up *two months*. Two months!"

"That's good, isn't it?" Harry said, picking up the quidditch game schedule. He hadn't yet heard from Professor Sprout about what gobstones would look like. "You were doing tryouts this weekend anyway, and no one on the team graduated."

"Bulstrode's lost a stone!" Astrid hissed. "I need those two months to get her back up to clobbering weight!"

Harry looked down the table, where Millicent displayed a healthy appetite.

“She’ll be fine,” Harry said, eyes narrowing as Draco stole a sweet from Mafalda. The girl didn’t notice, too busy talking excitedly to Graham Pritchard about something. It was strange, as the first-years tended to sit at the end of the table, not among the fourth-years.

“It’s Johnson who’s got to worry,” Terence said, leaning forward to whisper. “They haven’t got a reserve keeper. She’s got to train someone up in less than three weeks.”

“Book out the pitch,” Cassius suggested. “Don’t give her the chance.”

“Nothing doing,” Astrid said, finally sitting down. “McGonagall’s already got them down every day.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Draco’s tongue crashing through the table.

“Her name’s Hester,” Monty said quietly.

Hermione was nose deep in a book, a fierce expression on her face. Ron was with the members of the Gryffindor quidditch team, who were huddled together, shooting dark looks at the Slytherin table.

Luna nodded. “She sounds wonderful.”

“I’ve only told you her name.”

“Names are important,” Luna whispered. “We’re learning that in Arithmancy.”

“She was born on my birthday,” Monty said. “I could do her birth chart. I even know the exact time. I was wondering, have you ever heard of a blast-ended skrewt?”

Before Luna could respond, there was a terrible *crack*, and a thud that shook the Great Hall. Something massive and pink destroyed half of the Slytherin table. It writhed around like some horrible giant worm, with a panicking Draco Malfoy at the other end.

Monty watched in stunned silence as Harry was the first there, even faster than the professors, doing something to make the thing—Draco’s tongue, he realized—shrink. He knew about the Ton-Tongue Toffees, but the way Ron and Ginny had described it was nothing compared to what had just happened. It wasn’t funny at all. It looked like Malfoy was seriously hurt. Goyle had been knocked out, Parkinson was struggling to get out from underneath, Crabbe and Bulstrode were desperately trying to pull her out before she was crushed, the Ravenclaw table had been overturned, people were screaming—

He looked at Fred and George, who were both as shocked as everyone else. Monty didn’t think they were behind it. But who else?

Monty's eyes widened, and he looked back at the Slytherin table. At Mafalda, who was standing up and sipping her tea as if nothing had happened. Harry, he noticed, was also eyeing Mafalda. Professors Snape and Burbage had stepped in to help Malfoy. Malfoy, for his part, had fainted.

"That was brilliant," Ron said, dropping onto the bench next to Monty. Malfoy was being floated out on a stretcher, along with several other students. A few of the walking wounded limped behind the procession.

"I've seen daddy do that before," Luna said quietly. Her eyes were as wide as saucers, watching as Harry restored the Slytherin table, the destruction reversing itself. When he was finished, he waved over a boy Monty recognized from the gobstones team, one of the new prefects. Avery something. The prefect nodded, a grim expression on his face, then went to sit with the first-year Slytherins.

"Could I borrow your broom?"

Monty tore his eyes away from Harry. Professor Flitwick had run up to him, and was gesturing at the damaged Ravenclaw table.

"What?" he asked, turning to Ron.

"For tryouts," Ron said, turning slightly red. "I mean, you've got two of them."

Monty scrambled for an excuse. He definitely did *not* have two brooms anymore. The thought of asking Harry for a gift back was...he couldn't do it.

"I left the Nimbus with Sirius," he said apologetically.

"But he could owl it to you, right?" Ron asked, turning even more red. "It's just, I haven't got a broom, and Angelina wants to do tryouts on Friday..."

"I'll ask," Monty finally said, not wanting to leave his friend in a lurch.

Luna was humming to herself, but gave Monty a knowing look. She shifted her gaze to where Harry was being made to repair the Ravenclaw table

He had no idea what he was going to do.

"Most impressive, Mr. Evans!" Professor Flitwick squeaked. "I've never seen a sixth-year perform such a powerful Restoration Charm! And wordlessly, no less!"

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, putting his wand away. He studiously avoided looking at the head table, or the Gryffindor table, or at anything that could further incriminate him.

“Where did you learn it?” Professor Flitwick asked. “Frankly, it is beyond most seventh-years!”

“I was looking into the connection between cleaning charms and entropy,” Harry said absently. He had to do something about Mafalda. He doubted she knew what that toffee would do to Draco. The effect was drastically different from what Percy had described. Had she done something to amplify the effect? Had the toffees simply aged? “The imposition of order on chaos.”

“Remarkable,” Professor Flitwick said. “You know, you remind me of another student of mine.”

Warning bells went off in Harry's head. Dumbledore was listening, he had to be, and who knew how many others. If Harry tried to silence Professor Flitwick, it would have been as good as admitting the truth. He was trapped.

“She was incredibly gifted in charms,” Professor Flitwick continued, grinning like an oblivious idiot. “I'm surprised I never made the connection before, given her name was Lily Evans!”

“Really?” Harry said, smiling faintly, like he was indulging a dotty old man. “I don't think I've heard of her.”

“You might know her better as Lily Potter,” Professor Flitwick helpfully added.

Harry made a mildly surprised face. “It is an honor to be compared to her.”

Professor Flitwick sniffed, then wiped his eyes. “Yes, well...such a loss...” He cleared his throat. “Twenty, no thirty points to Slytherin!”

“That really isn't necessary, professor,” Harry said, looking down shyly. He rubbed the back of his head. “I was merely acting within my duties as a prefect.”

The door to the Slytherin common room slid shut. Harry didn't let himself relax. Dinner had resumed as normal, with Killian keeping an eye on Mafalda. A potential gobstones recruit, along with Bridget's little brother. So Killian had been told.

A house-elf appeared at his side. “For Mr. Evans, from Professor Sprout.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, accepting the note. He walked towards where Jasmine and Phoebe were sitting. Astrid had rounded everyone else up to talk quidditch. Harry broke the wax seal, frowning as he read Professor Sprout's message.

“What is it now?” Jasmine asked, giving him a concerned look. He sat down next to her, reading the note again.

“The short answer is, gobstones isn’t canceled,” he said. “Professor Dumbledore said as much, but it’s good to get confirmation.”

“Then what’s wrong?” Phoebe asked. She had her painted chorus frog on her lap, a sheet of paper held in front of him. She was trying to teach him how to read music.

“No round-robin this year,” Harry said, folding the note back up. “It’s too many games, she says. We’ve got to do intrahouse elimination rounds for team selection.”

“Just be grateful it wasn’t canceled,” Jasmine said. She was working on their essay for Ancient Runes. Harry was glad he’d finished his already. It was always better to get things out of the way. “Imagine if they canceled quidditch.”

“They would *never*,” Phoebe gasped. “Not with seventh-years on the teams. It’s their last chance to play!”

Harry leaned forward, motioning for them to follow suit. Jasmine gave him a curious look. He glanced at the stairs leading to the first-year dormitories.

“Listen,” he said quietly. “I need a favor.”

Once Pomfrey had revived him, Malfoy insisted he had no idea what had happened to him. It was an obvious lie, something Severus did not need Legilimency to detect. Normally Malfoy was quick to point the blame. That he refused to do so was deeply suspicious.

There was a knock on his office door, and Severus smiled to himself.

“Enter,” he said, smoothing his expression.

Harry shut the door, gave him a brief smile, then approached Severus’ desk. In his hand was a sweet wrapped in shiny pink foil.

“It’s called a Ton-Tongue Toffee,” Harry said, setting it on his desk. “A product the Weasley twins developed over the course of six months. Miss Prewett acquired several through some means. I saw Malfoy take one when she wasn’t looking.”

Severus shut his eyes in annoyance. The only thing he liked about the Weasleys was them *not* being in Slytherin.

“The effect was amplified somehow,” Harry said. “The twins aren’t stupid enough to sell something that does *that*. Miss Prewett accidentally had one this summer, and her tongue stopped growing at around four feet. It is meant to be comical.”

“How did you come across this information?” Severus asked, lacing his fingers together.

Harry flopped into a seat and rolled his eyes, abandoning his pretense of respect. Such a churlish child. “You know how. By the way, Flitwick compared me to mum.”

Severus sat back. Of course it would be Flitwick, Lily was his favorite student. Their professors adored her. Their professors still worked at Hogwarts.

Whatever Harry’s initial plan was when he began at Hogwarts, he had failed to hide how gifted he was. And, like Lily, when he saw a wrong being committed, Harry acted.

Harry bent forward, putting his face in his hands. “It’s fine,” he mumbled. “I have a plausible story.”

“Do you?” Severus said, not sure whether to be amused or concerned. “For what, exactly?”

Harry sniffed and sat back up, a hard look in his eyes. Severus’ eyes, though the shape was all Lily’s.

“It can all be connected to Percy,” Harry said, blushing slightly. “I met him in second year, you know. In the Forbidden Forest.”

“I did not know,” Severus said tonelessly. Weasley had been a fourth-year. In the forest with his twelve-year-old son. “Go on.”

Unforgivable

Chapter Summary

September 1994

Harry walked to the Owlery, his steps light and quick as he navigated the corridors and secret passageways of Hogwarts. He had a prefect round that evening, and had lingered far too long in his dad's office.

He had been too careless, he had got too close to Monty. Black suspected. He had seen them in Diagon Alley. Harry had spent weeks telling the man how important Monty was, how his plans for revenge paled in comparison to his brother's welfare. Dumbledore had wanted Harry to be watched, since his third year. The blocked barrier, taking Monty on the Knight Bus. Demanding Monty be taken from the Quidditch World Cup. There were other instances, Harry was certain, but he quieted his thoughts.

Monty was friends with Ron. Ron was Percy's brother. That could explain the blocked barrier, helping the younger brother of the boy he fancied. Then the basilisk. More than the attacks on muggleborns, Harry had been worried his brother would be exposed as a parselmouth. No one knew that, and no one ever would if Harry could help it. And it was Ginny who had been possessed, Percy's little sister. Harry hadn't known that at the time, but he had seen Percy take her to the hospital wing, had seen the girl's deterioration as the attacks continued.

Sirius Black was the hardest to explain away. Harry had captured him immediately after he had menaced Ron with a knife. He had learned about Peter Pettigrew, also known as Scabbers, Percy's old pet rat.

It was lucky that Monty had met Ron on the train.

Harry clenched his teeth as began the climb up to the Owlery. Monty had met Ron on the train, but Harry had been there too. He just so happened to have been in the same compartment.

Percy was no longer a student. Harry could not reframe every single interaction with Monty as having something to do with him. He couldn't afford any more slip ups.

His dad had shown him something Harry doubted anyone other than the Dark Lord and headmaster knew of. The symbol branded on the Dark Lord's most devout followers. Harry hadn't known that, not until his dad had told him. Had shown him that it was growing ever darker.

It was only a few days into the term, and Harry had not expected anyone else to be in the Owlery. It was too early for homesickness to really set in. It was past dinner, nearing curfew, and dusky light filtered in through the open windows. Harry felt a flush of anxiety at this, strong enough to give him pause, until he remembered there was no incantation to say. He was already an animagus.

The Owlery had been cleaned before start-of-term. The floor had yet to be decorated with feathers, droppings, and the moldering bodies of small rodents. Many of the owls were beginning to wake, shuffling on their perches and rustling their wings as Harry passed. He would use a school owl to send his letter.

As he searched for an owl who looked ready to fly, Harry spotted two heads of red hair.

“Well, well, well,” Harry said, approaching Fred and George. “Well, well, well, well, well.”

“Well what?” Fred asked, shifting to hide whatever George was doing. “We didn’t give Malfoy—”

“I know that,” Harry said. “If I suspected you had, well...”

George’s head popped up. “Well *what?*”

Harry smiled, then went back to examining owls.

“Who are you writing?” Fred asked suspiciously.

“Your brother,” Harry said easily, stroking the breast feathers of a barn owl who had been watching him with alert eyes.

“Which one?”

Harry turned to answer Fred, spotting George as he slunk off towards a window with a screech owl tucked under his arm.

“The one I snogged,” Harry said bluntly.

Fred made a face of disgust. “That’s my brother you’re talking about.”

Harry tied the small scroll to the owl’s leg, and held out his arm for her to climb on to. “Yeah, and you obviously know which one I’d owl. And which one values his privacy the most,” Harry added.

The owl took flight, curving through the air until she was flying south. Harry noted that the screech owl was going the same direction. Curious about what the twins were up to, Harry turned to confront them. They had scurried away.

“Dumb and dumber,” Harry said to himself, checking his watch.

“Are you talking about the film?”

Harry bit his lip so he wouldn't smile. Monty hadn't used his invisibility cloak to sneak up on him, instead relying on less easily detected charms. He had the Marauder's Map with him, and a letter. Harry couldn't make out who it was addressed to.

"I've seen the previews for it," Monty continued, walking up to him. He folded up the map and tucked it into his robes.

"I was referring to the twins," Harry said, more interested in what his brother was up to than whatever nonsense Fred and George were involved in.

"I did see them running down the stairs," Monty said, frowning. "Why are they so scared of you?"

"Survival instinct," Harry said. "What are you doing up here? It's nearly curfew."

Monty grimaced, looking at the letter in his hand. "Ron wants to try out for the quidditch team, and he asked me if he could borrow a broom."

"The Firebolt?" Harry asked. "That's a bit much for a keeper. Couldn't he borrow a school broom?"

Monty gave him an incredulous look.

"I know it isn't the best solution," Harry said, "but there are a few good ones."

Monty glanced at his letter again. "He asked to borrow the Nimbus. I said I'd left it with Sirius, and Ron said well, can't he owl it?"

Harry crossed his arms. "I see your dilemma."

"I can't tell him I've given it away," Monty said. He began to pace, the owls watching him carefully. "And tryouts are this Friday, so even if Sirius *did* have it there wouldn't be enough time to get here."

Bringing up the Nimbus 2000 had reminded Harry of a project he'd never got to over the summer. Doing something about its appearance.

"You can have it back," he said.

Monty stopped pacing. "But it's yours."

"You can borrow it, then," Harry said. "I haven't got round to illusioning it yet. It's spelled to resist that sort of thing. Brooms are tricky to enchant after they've been made."

"Proprietary," Monty said absently. He stopped in front of Hedwig's perch. She was the only snowy owl in the Owlery, and was deep asleep.

"Do you really not mind?" Monty asked. "I wasn't going to ask you at all, I was going to have Hedwig fly around a bit and come up with an excuse. Not right now," he added, seeing Harry's skeptical look. "In the morning."

“I really don’t mind,” Harry said quietly, joining his brother next to Hedwig. “Though I think it’s a bad idea.”

“To lend him something?” Monty asked.

“Not that,” Harry said. “Actually, maybe. But no, what I meant was, if Ron’s trying out for keeper, he should use a broom he’s more comfortable with. Even if it isn’t as flash as a Nimbus. Someone like Ryan—Ireland’s keeper—plays at a level where he needs a broom that can keep up with the chasers. He can handle a Firebolt, it’s his job. Ron isn’t going to be used to the speed or maneuverability of a Nimbus 2000, much less a Firebolt if he asks to borrow *that*.”

Monty nodded thoughtfully. “You know a lot about quidditch for someone who doesn’t like quidditch.”

“Against my will,” Harry assured him. “Ron would be better off borrowing one of his brothers’ brooms.”

“Ginny’s brought hers too,” Monty said.

“Did she?” Harry asked. “I don’t think your mate’s insensitive enough to ask her. Since she can’t be on the team.”

Monty winced. “Right, forgot about that.” He pushed up his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Harry watched him. Was his scar hurting again? But Monty didn’t touch his scar, and he didn’t look to be in pain. He was only stressed.

“The broom’s in my dormitory,” Harry said gently. “I’ll send it to you.”

Monty didn’t look happy with the solution, but he nodded again. “Thanks. You’re a lifesaver.”

Harry snorted at that. “Don’t mention it. It’s Wood’s fault you’re in this situation. And Johnson’s, for that matter. They should have planned for this last year.” Harry checked his watch again. “I’ve got to start my rounds. You can tag along if you want, and Hester too.”

Monty gaped at him. “How did you know she was here?”

Harry rolled his eyes and started walking towards the stairs. “I can hear her complaining in your pocket. Which reminds me, there are a few things you should know about occamies...”

Monty walked into his first Defense class of the year in a state of growing panic. He knew how Harry could act so cool and detached, like when watching a mob of Death Eaters approach. Occlumency. He practiced the mind clearing exercises Harry had taught him, but it

was much harder to do in the moment. He was convinced Remus would know as soon as he saw Monty up close that he was hiding something big.

But Professor Lupin was busy setting up a projector in the room. The atmosphere in the classroom was oddly tense.

The only one of Monty's teachers who had mentioned what happened at the Quidditch World Cup was Professor Burbage. It was relevant to Muggle Studies, since muggles and muggleborns were targets.

So were werewolves.

Monty knew Voldemort had recruited werewolves, like the one who had bitten Remus. Fenrir Greyback. But he also knew that Voldemort and his followers despised werewolves and others who weren't entirely human, or not human at all like centaurs and house-elves. To them, pureblood witches and wizards were at the very top, and everyone else was to either serve them or die.

He walked to the front row and found an empty chair, Ron trailing behind. Neville was already sitting up front, and Monty could tell he was on edge. Hermione ran in just as the bell rang, hastily getting her textbook out. She'd been acting strangely since the Welcoming Feast, refusing to eat, then eating at top speed to go to the library. Monty wasn't entirely sure what was going on with her.

Professor Lupin walked to the front of the room, smiling warmly at them all. He looked much improved over the previous year. Less tired, less careworn, newer robes. Monty knew how much he appreciated having a steady job.

"Welcome back, everyone," Professor Lupin said. "It's good to see you all again, particularly after what happened at the Quidditch World Cup."

Monty took a steadying breath.

"Typically," Professor Lupin said, "your introduction to curses and countercurses would begin in winter term. However, given recent events, the headmaster and I have made some adjustments to the curriculum." He waved his wand at the stack of papers on his desk. They began distributing themselves among Monty's classmates. Monty picked up his own, staring at the first topic listed on the syllabus.

"Now, the events of the Quidditch World Cup revived a lot of old fears," Professor Lupin said, raising his wand again. The lights in the room dimmed, a screen behind Professor Lupin unrolled all the way to the floor, and the projector in the back flickered on.

The first slide was the Dark Mark. Like all magical photographs, it was animated. And in color, too. Monty didn't know much about magical photography, but he had heard Colin Creevey talk about it before. Getting color images required an expensive potion.

The jaw unhinged, and a giant snake emerged, lifting its massive green head, its tongue flicking out to taste the air.

“Does anyone know what seeing this meant?” Professor Lupin asked, stepping aside so they could all see.

Monty raised his hand. Professor Lupin’s mouth thinned, but he nodded for Monty to answer.

“It meant that someone had been killed,” Monty said. He’d seen a picture of it in Godric’s Hollow, from the night Voldemort killed his parents.

“Indeed,” Professor Lupin said. “Sometimes it was muggles, or muggleborns. Sometimes it was Voldemort’s—” Ron and Neville both flinched. “—own followers. You are all too young to remember what it was like back then, but those of us who are older, even some of the sixth and seventh years, remember what it felt like to see this.”

The slide changed, showing the front page of a *Daily Prophet*.

Muggle Village Wiped Out — Ministry Spells Unplottable

“This, however, is not a history class,” Professor Lupin said levelly. “Defense Against the Dark Arts. The headmaster has said, and I agree, that you cannot defend against that which you do not know. For the next few months, we will be discussing not the politics, but the magics most frequently employed during the First Wizarding War. These are spells not only used by Voldemort and his followers, but those used by the Ministry and other groups in standing against him. The most notorious of these are the Unforgivable Curses.”

At his side, Neville had gone still.

“Before we begin our discussion,” Professor Lupin said, looking around the room, “I want you all to understand how serious a topic this is. Many of you know someone, or knew someone, who was the victim of one of these curses. People in your family, your professors, your friends, all of us have been impacted by the Unforgivables. This is not something I teach you lightly, and I expect you all to act accordingly. Is that understood?”

Monty nodded, listening as Neville’s breathing picked up.

Professor Lupin sighed. “Lavender, you can finish your Divination homework later.”

Monty looked back to see Lavender and Parvati scrambling to put something away.

“I will be showing you the effects these spells have,” Professor Lupin said. “If anyone would like to skip this lesson, you may take a study period in the Great Hall. No one? Alright. Does anyone know the name of one of the Unforgivable Curses?”

To Monty’s surprise, Ron was one of the people who raised his hand.

“My dad’s mentioned one,” Ron said. “The Imperius curse?”

Professor Lupin nodded, and with a flick of his wand the slide changed again. This time it was a photograph of a nervous looking man in the center of a plain room. A wand appeared in the frame. There was no sound, no light from a spell. One moment the man's eyes were darting around, the next they became unfocused. He smiled goofily, and began doing high kicks, like a dancer in a line. A few people laughed. The slide changed, and the man was doing back flips. Monty watched Professor Lupin's reaction, how his frown deepened as the laughter increased. Even Ron was laughing, enjoying the man's acrobatics, each slide showing progressively more absurd things. The slide changed again, and this time the man was outside, standing on the edge of a roof. He tipped forward. He was still smiling.

The laughter stopped when the man began to fall.

"The Imperius curse was invented during the Middle Ages," Professor Lupin said. "The inventor is unknown, but magical scholars have speculated that its intended use was against muggles. These photographs were taken during an experiment conducted in Grindelwald-controlled Europe, under the pretense of magical research."

Monty looked at the projection again. The man was there one moment, falling out of frame the next.

"The Imperius curse gives the caster complete control over their victim," Professor Lupin said. "The curse forces the victim to enjoy it. They are rewarded for their obedience. Many people in the Ministry were placed under the Imperius, and many more claimed to have been to avoid taking responsibility for their actions."

Monty looked over at the Slytherins, at Malfoy. He knew his father had used the Imperius defense.

"Have you all calmed down?" Professor Lupin asked. "Did you get that out of your system? I don't find it very amusing. Perhaps you will appreciate the horrors of the Imperius curse once we reach the practical portion of our study. Learning the hard way, as it were. Yes, Draco?"

"Are you going to show us what the curses look like in real life?" Malfoy asked, sounding excited.

"Not all of them, no," Professor Lupin said.

"I bet he can't even cast them," someone muttered.

"You'd be surprised what you find yourself capable of during a war, Theodore," Professor Lupin said drily. "There is a difference between being *able* to cast a spell, and being *willing* to. And the Unforgivables are among those spells which rely almost entirely upon your desire for the result. You have to mean it, and as a society we punish their usage heavily. A lifetime sentence in Azkaban. Now, can someone tell me the name of another Unforgivable?"

This time, it was Neville who surprised Monty. He hadn't expected his friend to be willing to bring it up. Monty certainly didn't want to talk about his own parents.

"Neville?" Professor Lupin said, looking slightly concerned.

“The Cruciatus curse,” Neville said. His voice was quiet, but clear.

“Yes,” Professor Lupin said. “Voldemort was fond of that one. Many of my friends were victims of it. I myself have experienced it. This is what it looks like when cast.”

Monty stared at Professor Lupin, but was soon distracted by the new slide. It was the same man who had been Imperiused, looking healthier than the previous slides. An earlier session, Monty supposed. Once again a wand silently appeared. There was no light, no indication that a spell had been cast at all, but the man abruptly collapsed. His mouth stretched open in a scream, and he trashed around violently. His body contorted into painful shapes, his eyes rolled madly in his head, spittle flew from his mouth as he screamed and screamed..

“Pain,” Professor Lupin said. The image stilled, focused on the man’s tortured face. “Excruciating, endless pain.”

Monty looked at Neville, at the terrible expression he made, his hands clenched and shaking on the desk.

“And what is the last Unforgivable?”

Monty glanced at Neville again, took a deep breath, then raised his hand. Professor Lupin nodded.

“The Killing Curse,” Monty said, his voice steady. “*Avada Kedavra.*”

The slide changed again, for the last time. It was the same man, his body battered from the fall he had taken. No one had bothered to heal him. The photograph had been colored. Monty could see bloodstains on the floor, the dark bruises on the man’s skin.

There was a flash of familiar green light, and the man fell to the floor. Dead.

“Whoa,” Ron said. He wasn’t the only one who seemed impressed by the Killing Curse. Monty could hear his other classmates whispering to each other, fascinated by such forbidden and horrible spells.

The lights suddenly went back on, and the image of the dead man vanished.

“It seems,” Professor Lupin said, giving them all a look of deep disappointment, “that you are not mature enough to handle this material.” He turned and began writing on the board. “Instead of a class discussion, you will be taking down notes. Get out your quills and parchment.”

The remainder of class was absolutely silent, save the sound of chalk and the scratch of quills trying to keep up. Neville was staring at his own parchment, not writing anything down. Monty made a note to give him a copy later.

At the end of class, people sullenly packed their things away. Monty lingered, worried about Neville. But Professor Lupin noticed, and asked Neville to stay after class.

“We can talk later,” he said to Monty. “My office is always open to you.”

Monty nodded, feeling oddly vulnerable, then hurried after his classmates.

They were talking excitedly about the first half of the lesson. Monty tried not to pay attention, even as he understood why they were intrigued by the Unforgivables. They were dark and macabre, something their parents wouldn't want them to see. But unlike him, and unlike Neville, their parents hadn't been tortured or killed. Their parents were alive and able to care.

"That was some lesson," Ron said as they walked to the Great Hall. Monty wasn't feeling up to dinner. "The way that bloke just died, just snuffed it!"

Monty's steps slowed, until he stopped walking.

"Monty, what's—" Hermione turned to look at him, her eyes widening in understanding.

"I'm going to the library," Monty decided, turning away from the Great Hall. He knew where the kitchens were. He could get food later, when he stopped feeling so sick.

High Visibility

Chapter Summary

September 1994

There was an interdepartmental meeting that morning, and Percy was scrambling to get his notes in order. There were two letters in his out-tray, one for Madam Pomfrey, the other for Harry. He had been dithering over both for days. The one to Madam Pomfrey had to be sent, he was on his last vial of litorin. As for the one to Harry, the question Percy had been struggling with was whether it was too soon. He knew how busy the beginning of the school year was for prefects, and Harry was the captain of a team as well. Did he have time for Percy?

The week leading up to the start-of-term had been extremely busy for Percy. Letters to the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons, letters to Hogwarts. Percy agreed that canceling quidditch would have been insane, Triwizard Tournament or not. The students needed to be entertained, and quidditch was a good outlet. Charity Lament would have rampaged through the Ministry if gobstones had been canceled. She was relentless.

At least the Howlers were being managed. They were now sent to an empty office to burn themselves out.

As Percy reviewed his notes for the meeting, a small scroll appeared in his in-tray. Thinking it may be last minute instructions, Percy picked it up and broke the seal.

Junior Secretary Weasley,

I miss you.

Sincerely,

Harry Evans

Sixth-year Slytherin Prefect

Captain of the Slytherin Gobstones Team

Percy sat down heavily, placing a hand on his chest. He took a moment to compose himself. Three simple words had changed the trajectory of his entire day. His entire life. Harry missed him. Him, in particular.

He looked at the scroll again, and saw it had a postscript. Percy idly rubbed his chest, wondering why it felt so strange. All Harry had written about were the first few days of school. All the events rescheduled, Mafalda luring Draco Malfoy with a Ton-Tongue Toffee, Neville Longbottom melting six cauldrons, how boring prefect meetings were going to be without him...

“Ready for the meeting, Weatherby?” Mr. Jordan said.

“Yes, sir,” Percy said, tucking the letter into his robes. He lingered over his stacks of paper and piles of scrolls; he needed time for his blush to retreat. He picked up one piece of paper, a short list of topics. He had all the information he needed committed to memory. “I’ve just got a lead on faulty cauldrons. A Hogwarts student melted six in one class period.”

“Really?” Mr. Jordan said. “Not uncommon to melt a cauldron or two in potions. Six, though... Who was it?”

Percy hesitated, then said, “Neville Longbottom.”

Mr. Jordan chuckled. “Wouldn’t put it past him. I suppose it doesn’t matter much. Framing cauldron leakages as dangerous to children is a good idea.”

Percy straightened his robes as followed Mr. Jordan to the meeting room. The meeting was not on cauldron bottoms, which was a shame as Percy had been working on a slogan for his next Ministry Announcement Regarding Magical Oddities and Threats, or M.A.R.M.O.T.

Cauldrons are in every household

Vampires are not

He was still working on it.

The meeting was being held on their floor, as International Magical Cooperation was ostensibly in charge of organizing the Triwizard Tournament. It was Mr. Crouch’s brainchild, an event which exemplified the importance of their department in a way that cauldron bottoms simply could not. It was popular, it had a long history, it was a spectator sport, and it placed Magical Britain back on the international stage. Professor Dumbledore being a longstanding member of the International Confederation of Wizards had lost its shine over

the decades. That whole mess with Gilderoy Lockhart and the nifflers was better left in the *Daily Prophet* back issues.

“Oh, good, Ludo’s here,” Mr. Jordan said, walking to join Mr. Crouch near the head of the table. Percy hesitated, unsure of where he belonged. He was spared from making a possibly incorrect choice when Mr. Jordan gestured for Percy to sit next to him. Percy quickly complied, resisting the urge to gawk at his surroundings.

The room was not particularly comfortable, nor very welcoming. The walls were a ghastly beige, the carpet was dark grey with a pile so low it made no sense. It should have been hardwood. There was a long rectangular table with a dull polish, longer than it seemed could fit in the room. The lighting threatened to give Percy a migraine.

It felt cheap, and it was baffling that the room even existed in its current state. It physically hurt to look at.

Percy set his lone piece of paper in front of him, then pulled a notebook and pen from his robes. He surreptitiously looked at who else was in attendance. There was Miss Jorkins of course, prepared to take notes with her quill and parchment. Ludo Bagman was there, smiling good-naturedly at everything. The people from Magical Transportation slumped in their chairs, their eyes shadowed from working overtime during the Quidditch World Cup. Others from his own department, people he greeted in passing but had never worked with directly.

He sat up straight when Mr. Crouch called the meeting to order.

Mr. Crouch, Percy had noticed, had a tendency to be long-winded. The opening remarks of the meeting were simply reminding them that the Triwizard Tournament was happening, a lackluster lecture on the lengthy history of the Tournament, and a list of the tasks that lay ahead for the champions.

“Weasley,” Mr. Crouch said. “You have a brother working at the Romanian Dragon Sanctuary?”

“Yes, sir,” Percy said immediately. “Charles Weasley.”

“You will be our liaison. According to their most recent correspondence, the dragons have had their pre-nesting shed. I want you to make sure their gestation is on track, we cannot afford any delays.”

“Absolutely, Mr. Crouch,” Percy said, already composing a letter to Charlie in his head. Hermes could go to Hogwarts first. Harry would forward his letters to Madam Pomfrey and his brother.

“Basil,” Mr. Crouch said. Basil Montgomery snorted, then sat bolt upright. “How is transportation coming along?”

“Our portkey offer has been rejected by both Karkaroff and Maxime,” Mr. Montgomery said through a yawn. “Both are insistent on bringing their own lodging and transportation.

Dumbledore... Hogwarts has more than enough space to put them up, but they aren't keen on mingling too much."

Mr. Crouch's expression darkened. "That rather defeats the purpose."

Mr. Montgomery laughed. "You tell them that, Barty. Karkaroff says he wants to personally oversee his students' education. Maxime claims she doesn't trust the rigor at Hogwarts."

"Their course sequences are different," Percy said, hoping he wasn't speaking out of turn.

"True, Weasley," Mr. Crouch said approvingly. "I am certain the Hogwarts professors would be accommodating. However, it is ultimately the decisions of Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime as to how their students are educated." He looked at Mr. Montgomery again. "How do they intend to arrive, Basil?"

Mr. Montgomery sighed, then began a long explanation of what Durmstrang and Beauxbaton wanted, and what they would have to do to make it work.

"You'll have to talk to the merfolk, Barty," Mr. Montgomery said. "And the Giant Squid, if you can manage it. The last thing we need is for Karkaroff to get shipwrecked by a freshwater kraken."

"That reminds me of something," Miss Jorkins burst out. "How are we meant to see what they do in the lake?"

"As part of our treaty," Mr. Crouch said slowly, "Merchietainess Murcus has agreed to report on the events."

"That's boring," Miss Jorkins said, scowling. "I don't want to stare at a lake for hours!"

Percy wholeheartedly agreed. He wanted to see Harry in the Black Lake.

He stared at a wall until his mind was clear. It was not the time for idle thoughts.

"She's got a point, Barty," Mr. Bagman said. "Truth be told, I've been wondering about that myself. It's a neat task, I'll give you that. Very heroic. But what's the point of heroism if no one actually sees you doing it?"

"Great deeds do not require an audience, Ludo," Mr. Crouch said. "Perhaps we can arrange seating within the Black Lake itself..."

The meeting went well past lunch time. Percy was prepared to brave muggle London and seek his own meal. Harry had told him tales of ready made foods at supermarkets, and the providence of coupons. Harry had also suggested transfiguring muggle money, which was illegal, taking what he needed, also illegal, or duplicating items and taking those, which was in a legal grey area. Percy did have muggle money, which seemed the least roundabout way of acquiring muggle goods.

He stood up when the others did, then followed Mr. Jordan out of the room. Mr. Jordan, in turn, was hurrying after Mr. Bagman

“Ludo, it’s been a week,” Mr. Jordan said. “We really need to settle—”

“Sorry, Ken, I’ve got another meeting!” Mr. Bagman said, breaking into a jog.

“Son of a...” Mr. Jordan said as Mr. Bagman disappeared around a corner. He shook his head, then turned to smile ruefully at Percy. “Here’s a tip, Percy. Don’t place bets with a Bagman.”

The broom was at the foot of Monty’s bed when he woke the morning of tryouts. The tryouts themselves weren’t until the afternoon. He didn’t bother putting his glasses on, just sat in bed looking at the blurry form of his old Nimbus 2000 as the other boys in his dormitory got ready for the day.

Monty had no idea what Hermione had said to Ron, if she had said anything at all, but Ron hadn’t brought up their Defense lesson again. Nor had he apologized for what he had said. He was pretending it hadn’t happened at all.

Monty couldn’t pretend that. He couldn’t pretend that his parents weren’t dead, or that the spell that had killed them hadn’t left a scar. The same scar Ron had asked to see as soon as he learned Monty was Monty Potter, the Boy Who Lived. The first thing everyone noticed about him, the thing everyone wanted to see. The famous scar.

He put his face in his hands, frustrated. More than frustrated, he was upset. Angry. It was such a casually cruel thing for Ron to say, but the only difference between Ron and their classmates was he had happened to say it to Monty. Would he have said if he knew Monty remembered? That the dementors had forced him to remember his mum’s last words? Her begging Voldemort to spare his life?

The curtains around his bed were ripped open.

“Oh, great, the broom’s here!” Ron said excitedly. Then, “You alright, Monty?”

“I’m fine,” Monty said. There was probably a spell to lock his curtains or something. Harry would know. “Woke up with a headache.”

“You should see Madam Pomfrey,” Ron said wisely. “Is it still okay for me to borrow your broom? Tryouts are tonight, and—”

“It’s fine,” Monty said, pushing his blanket aside. It felt confining. He felt trapped.

“Thanks!” Ron said happily, skipping off to get ready. Monty sat on the edge of his bed, not feeling up to going to classes, or doing much of anything.

“Are you really okay?” Neville asked softly.

Monty squinted up at Neville, saw the look of concern. He shrugged, reaching for his glasses. They were next to Hester's cage, and she gave him an intent look. She was too young to understand why he was upset.

"Professor Lupin's really nice," Neville said. "He said he knew my parents. They went to school together."

"Yeah," Monty said, deciding he ought to get out of bed. There were quidditch tryouts later, after all. "He knew mine too."

The first prefect meeting of the year was postponed. There were too many quidditch players among the prefects to make it viable, with the teams scrambling to hold tryouts, determine their starting lineups, and get practice in. Harry had moved the first gobstones meeting as well, as Astrid had demanded his presence at both the Gryffindor and Slytherin tryouts.

Angelina Johnson, the new Gryffindor quidditch captain, had scheduled their tryouts for Friday, after classes let out, presumably to have the weekend to train her new team. Harry was lucky to have a free period just before that, same as Angelina, and had decided to track down his brother. He had delivered the Nimbus, as promised, but Monty had been morose the few times Harry had seen him throughout the day.

A quiet *meow* told Harry that his brother was in the library. Smiling to himself, Harry left Tracey Davis to observe the warm-up games in the common room—an event which never failed to annoy anyone not playing gobstones—and followed Lady Madeleine.

"How did you get back in?" Harry asked as they traversed the dungeons.

"Meow."

"Really? Makes sense."

The library was fairly empty at the beginning of the year. Only the most dedicated students braved its dusty aisles. Harry spotted Mafalda near the entrance, along with several other first-years, including Dennis Creevey from Gryffindor. Killian was leading them around, and he gave Harry a baleful look.

Lady Madeleine disappeared around a shelf, and Harry quickly followed her. She led him to one of the history sections. He'd overheard some of the fourth-years in his house, Blaise and Millicent, talking about the essay Professor Burbage had assigned. Assuming that was what his brother was working on, Harry slowed down. He needed a reason for being there. History of Magic? What had Professor Binns been droning about? A gargoyle strike?

"You should have given it up like me."

Harry stopped next to a shelf, pulling out a book at random. *The Owl Airforce: True Life Tales of War in Europe*. Harry smiled to himself. They were covering the Owl Airforce later that year. Monty and Luna would probably be interested in tales of gallant owls.

“It’s not that much work,” he heard Monty say. Harry peered through the shelves, and saw his brother looked annoyed. “But it’s not exactly easy to concentrate when Ron’s busy making up his predictions. Which, by the way, don’t even make sense. You can’t say Mars and Jupiter are in an *unlucky conjunction* when they are in opposition!”

“Is that really important?” Hermione asked. “Or are you still mad at him? You know, he *is* sorry.”

“Then he should say that,” Monty said.

Hermione shook her head. “I’ve got more important things to worry about. I can’t believe Hogwarts runs on slave labor!”

Harry quietly sighed.

“What are *you* on about?” Monty asked. “I thought you were doing extra research for Muggle Studies.”

“House-elves!” Hermione snapped. “House-elf enslavement goes back *centuries*. Have you ever wondered how the food gets made? How everything is cleaned? How our trunks get off the train?”

“No,” Monty said.

Harry covered his mouth to laugh.

“Of course you haven’t,” Hermione muttered. “Typical!”

“No, I mean, I’ve known Hogwarts has had house-elves for years,” Monty clarified.

Harry decided it was about time he intervened.

“You two are making a racket,” he said, stepping into view. Lady Madeleine wound between his legs, then ran up to Monty and began to purr. She was a traitor.

“Do *you* know about the enslavement of house-elves here in Hogwarts?” Hermione asked, apparently not caring if Madam Pince kicked her out.

“Yeah,” Harry said, pulling out a chair for himself. “Hogwarts is a sanctuary for house-elves who have been abused.”

“Helga Hufflepuff brought them here,” Monty added, reaching down to pet Lady Madeleine.

Hermione's eyes shone with righteous fury. “It’s still slavery! Just because they’re treated better doesn’t make the whole thing better! I can’t believe no one’s done anything about this before now.”

“That’s not true,” Harry said bluntly. “There was an appeal to end house-elf slavery about twenty years ago, but the Wizengamot tossed it out. They didn’t want to alienate the pureblood families. There are also guidelines promulgated by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures regarding house-elf welfare. Not to mention the Office for House-Elf Relocation, which vets families for displaced, dismissed, and abused house-elves.”

Harry hid a smile as Lady Madeleine made herself at home on Monty’s lap. She was sniffing at his robes, where presumably an occamy was sleeping.

“There you go, Hermione,” Monty said, gently redirecting Lady Madeleine.

“How do you know all of that?” Hermione demanded. “I haven’t read anything like that!”

“He worked for the Ministry this summer,” Monty reminded her. “You saw him.”

“You could try talking to a house-elf,” Harry suggested. “You know, before you start making decisions for them.”

Hermione looked at the two of them, then started packing up her things. “I can still advocate for their rights. And obviously the laws that do exist aren’t working!”

“Not really,” Harry agreed. He glanced at Monty’s Divination homework. It wasn’t in his wheelhouse, but the aspect calculations seemed correct.

“I thought you were looking up stuff for muggleborns,” Monty said, glancing at Harry. “You know, because of what happened at the World Cup?”

“What?” Hermione asked, sounding genuinely puzzled. “That was just one instance, Monty. Muggleborns aren’t being systematically oppressed. House-elves are forced to labor day and night, in our very school! No pay, no benefits, no holidays, just more work!”

Harry watched her storm off, then shared a look with his brother.

“The house-elf issue is more real to her,” Harry offered.

Monty frowned, looking down at his predictions, leaving a hand on Lady Madeleine. She was purring up a storm. Monty sighed, then said, “Not the best day, astrologically speaking.”

Harry watched his brother for a moment, his concern growing. He knew he was doing the exact thing he promised himself not to do.

How could he *not* help his little brother?

“What else happened?” Harry asked.

Astrid had her pair of omnioculars trained on the quidditch pitch. She was not actually *on* the quidditch pitch, nor was she in the stands. Through the pair of omnioculars Astrid had given him—Mhairi's, based on her name written in purple on the underside—Harry watched her watching the Gryffindor try-outs from her perch on the spire of the western bell tower. She had flown up there.

Harry had disillusioned himself and sat in the stands, which was fine by Astrid. She wanted the tryouts recorded from two perspectives. Most of Gryffindor was in attendance, and were doing a good job of chasing the spies off.

It wasn't good enough.

There was one other person outside of Gryffindor watching, Luna Lovegood. She had waved at Harry, a little unnerving given he was invisible. He had even disillusioned his cat, not his best idea as he had lost track of her.

Angelina, to Harry's disappointment, was only holding tryouts for a new keeper. She was taking a leaf out of Oliver Wood's book of quidditch captaining, and apparently had no intention of training reserve players. Harry could not fathom what justified this lack of planning, the Gryffindor's bizarre focus on the current season with no thoughts at all of the future of their house team. It was even more perplexing, as there were kids obviously interested in playing quidditch who would have been thrilled to be on reserve.

What if there hadn't been quidditch that year, like his dad intimated was a possibility? Then Monty would be a year out of practice. The entire team would be.

Sighing, he turned his omnioculars onto the pitch. Keeper wasn't exactly a popular position, so there were only four candidates. Two fifth-years, Cormac McLaggen and Vicky Frobisher, a third-year named Geoffrey Hooper, and Ronald Weasley. Harry had never paid much attention to the fifth-year class, excluding Killian by the grace of gobstones. He was vaguely aware of Vicky as she was in Charms Club. Geoffrey was a non-entity.

All in all, it wasn't an impressive bunch. The third-year was all over the place. He complained about everything, from how hard Katie Bell was throwing the quaffle, to the direction the wind was blowing.

The fifth-year girl seemed distracted, but was a decent flier. She would be a decent player, if anyone bothered to train her. With two weeks until their first game, Angelina didn't have the time.

It came down to the last two players. Cormac, who looked like an arrogant bellend, and Ron, a massive dickhead. Two sides of the same shitey coin.

Normally, Harry would have kinder thoughts towards Ronald Bilius Weasley. He was Monty's friend, his first friend other than Hedwig. As for how long that would remain true, Harry couldn't say.

Monty had shared Ron's—and his entire classes'—reaction to seeing the Unforgivable curses. Harry got it, his own friends had cracked jokes about the curses, especially with

Lockhart struggling to teach them. It was a way to deal with the disturbing reality of those spells existing. Of those spells being used against people they knew. Of relatives in Azkaban for casting them. At least Adrian knew how to own up to his mistakes, and knew when he had fucked up. When he had crossed a line.

Maybe Ron was too accustomed to how his older brothers would respond when he acted like a git. They didn't become withdrawn and silent, they hit back twice as hard. And if they pushed too far, at the end of the day they were still family. Monty didn't have that to fall back on.

Harry focused on Ron, who was smiling in the rictus of stagefright. Monty had actually lent him the Nimbus 2000. However unpleasant Ron was, at the end of the day Harry's brother was an incredibly kind person.

Harry, on the other hand, unkindly hoped Ron would get ploughed.

It was almost comical, seeing the bulky Cormac next to the awkwardly lanky Ron, hunched over a broom Harry very much doubted he could fly. Cormac just had to sit in front of the hoops and let the quaffles bounce off of him. When he was called to try out, Cormac barely had to move to catch the quaffles. He was from the Marcus Flint school of quidditch players: the bigger the better. Even Astrid slipped into that mentality sometimes, particularly when she talked about bulking Millicent up. The girl was already built like a brick shithouse. It was impressive for her age.

Harry had to keep the omnioculars on the keeper tryouts. They recorded everything, and he didn't want Astrid asking why he was looking around the field. He had the omnioculars trained on the hoops while his own eyes wandered. He was really only interested in how his brother was doing. To his amusement, Monty was sitting sideways on his Firebolt. Harry maintained it was the more comfortable position, particularly for those with good balance. Far fewer bugs in the face, too.

Cormac was, thus far, the best in terms of flying and keepering. Harry didn't want to cast aspersions on him based on his appearance, or his resemblance to some of Cedric's friends on the Hufflepuff team. Arrogance would be disruptive to the team dynamic, particularly since the Gryffindor team had been playing together for three years.

Ron, in many ways, was the preferable choice. He was a Weasley, who were mostly avid quidditch players with the skills to back up their passion. He had brothers on the team. He had played quidditch with them his entire life. There was precedent.

Harry suppressed a laugh when Ron missed his first save. As he predicted, the Nimbus 2000 was too much for Ron to handle. It was a seeker's broom, it had a hair-trigger response to every twitch Ron made, and he kept overshooting. It was too fast, too responsive. Ron dove for a dropped quaffle and nearly made Harry's wish come true. Luna clapped. Hermione, who had been reading, shot her a dirty look.

Harry had to look through the omnioculars again as Ron was moving erratically. He drifted to one side, which Harry could tell was not intentional. Harry was fairly certain he himself would do better at being a keeper.

It was a joke, and Angelina was clearly unhappy with the decision she had to make. Astrid, on the other hand, would be over the moon. Harry could already imagine her sowing dissension among the Gryffindor team. She wouldn't have to try hard, given the chilly reception of Cormac McLaggen as the new keeper.

Harry clicked his tongue, and after a few moments felt Lady Madeleine brush against him. He watched his brother land to either confront or comfort his embarrassed friend, but Ron was walking away from the pitch, taking the Nimbus 2000 with him. Monty watched Ron leave with an unreadable expression, then was called over by his captain to meet his new teammate.

Harry stuffed the omnioculars into a pocket, turned into a squirrel, and rode his cat into the night.

Natural Enemies

Chapter Summary

September 1994

Harry watched with mild interest as Astrid methodically beheaded her kippers. Since the Gryffindor tryouts, she had an air of self-satisfaction, and rabid determination. It made him feel slightly inadequate in his own captain duties. It was a bit much for a Sunday, but the Slytherin tryouts were that morning. She was excited.

The Gryffindors straggled in, the members of their quidditch team moving as a group. There were few early risers in Gryffindor. Percy's absence in the Great Hall left a chasm that could not be filled.

Astrid cracked small bones between her molars, then took a bracing chug of tea, watching the Gryffindors as they settled at their table. Harry noticed that Ronald Weasley was absent. He didn't care.

Astrid abruptly stood, and Harry's interest rose.

"The Slytherin quidditch team tryouts will commence in forty-two minutes," Astrid declared, her voice ringing throughout the hall. Conversation stopped, breakfasts were abandoned, as the students turned their focus on Astrid.

"Miss Urquhart!" Professor McGonagall said from the head table. Harry looked at his dad, who had adopted a bland expression. "It is *far* too early for—"

"Those who dare are welcome to witness the indomitable might of the Rampant Occamies!"

"Severus, control your student!"

"Come, come to the Slytherin tryouts!" Astrid cried, raising her fist. "Confront the inevitability of your destruction! Learn what it is for hope to die!"

Satisfied, Astrid sat back down and returned to her breakfast.

"That was unusually eloquent for you," Harry said, clapping politely. The reaction from the actual team was much more enthusiastic, Graham Montague leading the roar of applause while Professor McGonagall threatened to take points for the disruption.

Astrid shrugged, buttering a piece of toast. "Snape's my head of house too."

Phoebe sniffed delicately, wiping her eyes. She had forgotten she was holding her frog and ended up rubbing him over her face. "I can't believe we did it. An actual team name!"

"An *official* team name," Astrid said pointedly. "Approved by Snape himself." She glanced at Harry. "How did you manage that?"

Harry smiled to himself, thinking of the very real occamy that was also part of the deal. "It's a secret."

"Your prefects are encouraging this behavior, Severus," McGonagall said, frowning at the boisterous Slytherin table.

"Oh, let them have fun," Charity said, rolling her pretty blue eyes. "It's better than hexing each other in the corridors."

McGonagall sighed, turning her gaze toward the oddly subdued Gryffindor table.

"I have been petitioned numerous times for the team to acquire a live occamy as a mascot," Severus said flatly. "Allowing Urquhart to occasionally pontificate has a palliative effect."

"Give them enough rope," Charity said suggestively, smiling at him.

Severus noted that, since the term had begun, Charity exclusively wore muggle garments. That morning, she had walked into the Great Hall wearing blue jeans, and a striped shirt that sometimes rode up to expose a sliver of her generous stomach. He studiously averted his eyes.

She and Lupin had seemingly corroborated to address the reemergence of anti-muggle sentiment following the Quidditch World Cup. Lupin, for his part, was also looking at the Gryffindor table, to where Monty Potter sat with Neville Longbottom. Severus had overheard the fourth-years chattering about their Unforgivables lesson. It made sense the two would bond over it, while their classmates labored under an enduring ignorance no amount of scrubbing cauldrons could eradicate.

Severus had become more tolerant of children in recent years, but he was not obligated to like them. There was, of course, one exception, who was engaged in the time-honored tradition of inciting interhouse quidditch animus.

He caught Harry's eye, and inclined his head.

"You're just as bad as they are," Charity said, doing something to her bubble and squeak that made it emit little shrieks. The woman was far too fond of playing with her food.

"I disagree," Severus said, watching as Urquhart dragged his son out of the Great Hall. His cat stole the rest of Urquhart's kippers before following. "I'm much worse."

“I reckon this is Astrid’s first sally against Gryffindor,” Harry said as they settled into the stands. “Demoralization.”

“You reckon, do you,” Jasmine said drily, while Phoebe muttered to her frog, holding him at wandpoint. Jasmine noticed, and gave her a little shove. “What are you doing?”

“I was going to give Felipe wings,” Phoebe said. “A winged frog.”

“If you want a *llamhigyn y dwr*, ask Professor Lupin,” Harry said. “Or Professor Hagrid. If there’s a swamp in the Forbidden Forest, he’d know about it.”

“Don’t those have bat wings?” Jasmine asked. “Hold on, his name is *Felipe*?”

As Jasmine and Phoebe discussed the benefits of various wings—Harry was of the opinion that a parachute sac would suit Felipe the frog best—the Slytherin quidditch team walked onto the pitch. The entire team, reserve players included. As usual, first-years had optimistically arrived up with school brooms, or brooms borrowed from older students. Harry had yet to get the Nimbus 2000 back, but he wasn’t in a rush. He did precious little flying at school, and until he found a way to hide the Nimbus in plain sight, he’d be on school brooms too.

Among the first-years was Mafalda, who was being shown how to swing a beater’s bat by Millie.

Harry narrowed his eyes. He doubted Astrid would snipe one of his potential gobstones players, but also knew she could keep Mafalda in line. Rather, he hoped she could. The girl was ferociously intelligent, a rival for Hermione Granger based on Killian’s report, and had proven to have a knack for mischief. As a team sport, quidditch required more discipline than gobstones. And, unlike the more forgiving gobstones team, his dad required the quidditch players to keep their grades up and their noses clean. Too many detentions and they were out.

He crossed his arms, observing how Mafalda interacted with the team. Given she lived with the Weasleys, it made sense she would develop an interest.

As Astrid put the players through their paces, students from other teams began trickling in. Harry watched Terence go up against Draco in a seeker's match, noting that Draco was looking more comfortable on his Nimbus 2001. Even still, it wasn’t a substitute for experience, as Terence demonstrated by nearly crashing into him to catch the snitch.

Astrid had somehow got four bludgers, which the starting and reserve beaters were pelting at the chasers. She had also enchanted a whirlwind of quaffles to batter poor Miles Bletchely, who was doing his best to guard the hoops on both sides of the pitch. There were bludgers and quaffles flying in all directions, a deadly aerial maze which Astrid hounded the players through. It was absolute chaos. It wasn’t quidditch, not anymore. It was a battleground.

“Look at the Ravenclaws,” Phoebe said.

Harry looked at their stands. The first thing he saw was Luna waving at him. Then he saw their captain, Roger Davies, vomiting.

Jasmine wrinkled her nose. “Pathetic.”

Harry looked around at the other stands, skipping over Hufflepuff to where the Gryffindors were watching the insanity unfold. Monty was there, and Neville, but neither Ron nor Hermione were present. He imagined Ron was still bitter about his abject failure to perform even the most basic task of staying on a broom.

“Is that an owl?” Phoebe asked, pointing at the sky.

Harry looked up, watching as the owl approached the Slytherin stands. His heart skipped a beat when he recognized the bird.

It was Hermes, who had a scroll gripped in his beak. He was coming from the castle, clever bird that he was.

“I wonder who it’s for?” Phoebe asked.

“Me,” Harry said, holding out his arm for Hermes to land. “From Madam Pomfrey, I’d wager.”

“I thought you were done with weekly appointments?” Jasmine said with a slight frown.

“Blame my frail muggle body,” Harry said, taking the scroll from Hermes. “I better see what she wants.”

Monty watched Harry leave the stands, frowning thoughtfully. He had seen that owl before, at the Burrow. It was Percy’s owl, Hermes. He glanced at Fred and George, but they were preoccupied with some parchment they were bent over, whispering to each other.

Watching the Slytherin tryouts was an eye-opening experience. At the Quidditch World Cup, he had seen quidditch played at a level he had never imagined. The speed and precision of the players was phenomenal. Oliver had tried, not very well, to explain some of the more dangerous seeker feints to Monty, but his diagrams did little justice. Monty hadn’t considered the sort of training that would create such exceptional players.

Urquhart had. She was a demon on a broom, a general overseeing a battle from above, in a thousand places at once as she worked her team to the bone. Angelina had a white-knuckled grip on her seat, while Alicia was frantically taking notes.

Monty couldn't say he was getting much from watching them practice, aside from a growing sense of inadequacy. Higgs was a brilliant seeker, and had an awareness of the pitch that Malfoy lacked. He didn't get in the way of his team. Monty knew he had a lot to learn, that there was more to being a seeker than getting the snitch first. The World Cup had shown that it might not matter if he did.

"Have you finished your Divination homework?" Neville asked him.

"Not yet," Monty admitted.

Ron's behavior had put him off it. His poor performance at tryouts, the broom carefully left on Monty's bed, his increasingly dire made-up predictions. The mood in the common room was not improved by Hermione rattling her box of badges in all of their faces, demanding two sickles to join the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare. The acronym wasn't doing the cause any favors.

One of Hermione's goals was to increase house-elf representation in the Ministry. It wasn't a bad idea, but Monty felt they should increase house-elf representation in their house-elf advocacy group first. House-elves certainly could not afford the membership fee.

"Do you want to go to the library?" he asked Neville.

Neville nodded eagerly, and they left the stands together. Monty saw Luna skipping out of the Ravenclaw stands, and they waited for her to catch up before walking to the castle.

"You are going to the library," Luna said by way of greeting.

"How'd you know that?" Neville asked.

"You look very studious right now," she said matter-of-factly.

Monty smiled, for the first time in what felt like days. He wasn't entirely sure what he felt about Ron. Talking to Harry had helped.

Harry had heard a lot of insensitive things while in Slytherin, even things directed at him. He had told Monty that he also didn't have friends until he started at Hogwarts, and it had taken a while for them all to get used to each other. It was hard with so many different interests, and differing personalities. Harry often needed some space from them when it got to be too much.

Monty had decided that he needed some space from Ron, especially when he was stewing in his own misery. And he felt guilty for what had happened during tryouts. While part of him had wanted to help Ron out, to let him borrow the Nimbus, a secretive part of Monty had suspected Ron would fail. The Nimbus was a racing broom, it was a stupid choice. Harry had said that flat out, and Monty knew it was true. He never mentioned it to Ron.

In the end, Ron had got exactly what he asked for. There was a vindictive pleasure in that.

"Your birthday is right before mine," Monty said as they crossed the entrance hall. Luna ran over to look at the marble staircase. "Our charts are going to be nearly identical."

“I don’t want to copy,” Neville said quickly.

“I meant you can double check yours using mine,” Monty said. “Copying isn’t a good idea anyway. Especially if you want to be prepared for O.W.L.s.”

Neville groaned, covering his face. “Don’t talk about O.W.L.s already. I can’t take it.”

“Owls,” Luna said. “What kind of animal do you think Harry is?”

“Harry?” Neville asked. “You mean Evans?”

“A snake,” Monty said. “But a really cool one. Like a cobra. Or a krait.”

“A selma,” Luna suggested. “But those aren’t arboreal.”

“Just because he’s a Slytherin doesn’t mean he’s a snake,” Neville said. “*Arboreal* snakes? You mean there are snakes that live in trees?”

“Oh, yes,” Luna said, her eyes growing with excitement. Monty liked Luna’s eyes. They were big and expressive. Pale, silvery pools of pure magic. “I want to look up books about snakes.”

“We can do that,” Monty said immediately, not seeing the look Neville gave him.

Harry carried Hermes up to the Owlery. He needed some time to rest before making the flight to Romania. Harry was curious why Percy was writing to his brother Charlie, but not curious enough to invade his privacy. Similarly with the message for Madam Pomfrey. Harry had a good idea what that was about anyway. Acquiring a nogtail was one of his long-term goals.

Once Hermes was settled in next to Hedwig, Harry made his way back down the castle. Astrid would forgive him for not staying through tryouts, and he knew his friends would be there for hours yet, so he decided to go to the library.

Being at Hogwarts brought his portkey research to a standstill. There were enchantments soaked into the very stones of the castle, some hundreds of years old, that only the headmaster could bypass. Anti-apparition and anti-portkey spells were vital in protecting the students, particularly during the Dark Lord’s rise. Hogwarts was meant to shelter the magical children of Britain. It wasn’t perfect, Harry knew. There was nothing to stop an animagus from entering the castle. It was possible no such magic existed. For all Harry knew, Peter Pettigrew was being kept in a steel box.

He crossed his arms as he walked, ignoring the startled looks a group of third-year Hufflepuffs gave him. There was something much more important than portkeys, much more important than anything.

Monty's scar. The prophecy, the dream, the pain.

How Monty had survived the Killing Curse was a mystery, so much so that it was rarely discussed. It was assumed that Monty was special in some way, though anyone who actually knew Harry's brother could see he was a normal kid. Intelligent, hardworking, kind, a survivor not of the Dark Lord but of the Dursleys, inquisitive, open-minded, and generally the best person. Harry was immensely proud of having him as a brother. Not that he could tell Monty that.

There was little anyone knew of what had happened the night their mother died. If Harry were to choose someone who knew the most, it would be Dumbledore. Waltzing up to the headmaster's office and demanding answers was laughably unrealistic, so Harry would have to research on his own. Without anyone knowing. Academic curiosity was not adequate to justify him devoting time to studying the Killing Curse. Perhaps even performing it, to examine the results.

Harry's arms tightened around himself.

For Monty's sake, he would do it. If he needed to learn the Killing Curse to find the root of his brother's pain, what had caused the scar that had changed their entire world, he would. He would do what he had to.

The library was fortunately quiet. Madam Pince gave him a piercing look, but soon went back to her bookbinding. Harry Evans wasn't a troublemaker.

He started his search in the main area. He knew there would be nothing in depth on the Unforgivable curses in the general collection, other than historical or legal texts. It was dark magic, dark in a way the jinxes and hexes taught in Defense were not. There were no countercurses. They caused damage that could not be reversed. However, he knew there were books on healing magical injuries, such as wounds from so-called dark creatures. It would be a place to start researching the connection between dark magic and the traces it left behind.

Walking through the shelves, deep in thought, Harry stumbled upon his brother.

Monty was sitting at a table. He and Luna were surrounded by books opened to images of different magical snakes. Already knowing what that was about, Harry glanced at Neville, who was looking between two birth charts, a parchment covered with calculations of angles, and a book filled with dense number tables.

"They aren't native here," Monty was saying. "It's not a good idea to have one flying around, doing whatever it wants. It could damage the ecosystem."

Luna nodded. "There could be something invasive for her to hunt."

Monty chewed the end of his quill. "Hagrid's got hundreds of skrewts."

Concerned about where the conversation was going, Harry walked up to their table. Neville yelped and fell out of his chair, spilling his ink everywhere. Harry distractedly waved a hand at the mess, the bottle righting itself and the ink flowing back in.

As Neville climbed back into his chair, Harry asked, “And what, exactly, is a skrewt?”

Harry’s throat tightened as soon as the stench hit him. He couldn’t breathe. His skin broke out in giant hives. His eyes watered, and began to swell shut.

Wishing he had asked more questions before being led to the blast-ended skrewt crates, Harry wordlessly conjured a bubble around himself, fumbled for his allergy medication, and stabbed himself in the leg.

He fell onto his hands and knees, coughing, choking as he desperately sucked in air. He knew he had to get to the hospital wing as soon as possible.

“Harry!” Monty shouted, running back to him, the excitement over the blast-ended skrewts forgotten. Luna was close behind. Neville had begged off, but Luna was interested in all creatures and had wanted to see them.

Monty stopped before he crashed into the bubble, his wand raised helplessly.

Harry tried to smile reassuringly. “I think...those fuckers...are my natural enemy,” he rasped.

Monty looked alarmed by this information.

“I’ll get Madam Pomfrey,” Luna said quickly, sprinting back to the castle. Harry had never seen her move so fast. He hung his head, kept breathing. It hurt. A lot.

“Your allergy,” Monty said. “Shellfish. I should have thought about that! I am so sorry, Harry. I didn’t think—”

Harry shook his head. “Not...your fault. Not many...magical...terrestrial...shellfish...”

It was much worse than any allergic reaction he had ever had, even when he’d accidentally eaten peanuts. The blast-ended skrewts were an abomination, an incarnation of pure evil. At the moment, he didn’t care how cool it was that their arses exploded.

“I was thinking Hester could eat them,” Monty said. He was starting to ramble. “Since there’s so many of them. Hagrid wouldn’t notice any missing.”

“My...hero...” Harry managed to say, laying down in the grass. If he died from the miasma of a blast-ended skrewt, he would never forgive himself.

“Luna’s coming back,” Monty said. “She’s got Madam Pomfrey with her. And Professor Snape. He looks...not happy.”

Harry tried to laugh, but only managed to wheeze. “Don’t tell him...it was your idea...my...own fault...”

Harry heard his dad's not happy voice, and decided it was time for a little nap.

The Mating Habits of the Insectoid Manticore

Chapter Summary

September 1994

Chapter Notes

This is how writing goes sometimes:

Start writing. Wait. Skrewts. Need to know skrewt growth rate and skrewt population growth. Collect data from books. Attempt regression analysis on skrewts. Check to see if someone has already done this. Should've done that first. Nope. Interpret results. Conclusion: skrewt size correlated to skrewt population. Which I already knew. But now I have a sketchy model for the size of the skrewts and the size of the population over a 297 day period. Yay.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The ongoing Slytherin quidditch team tryouts-cum-practice could be heard in the staff room. Indeed, it was the only sound in the staff room, as his colleagues were not completely oblivious. Even Hagrid, who had walked in swinging a dead polecat, was able to read a room.

Severus stared at the wall opposite him. It had been pure luck that Pomfrey had summoned him, that he had been in the hospital wing when the Lovegood girl raced in with the news his son was dying. Pomfrey had requested his presence to consult on a letter his son had delivered to her, not an hour earlier.

He folded his hands together. If he did not do so, he would have begun strangling Hagrid. The headmaster frowned upon murdering one's coworkers.

Severus had summoned the entire staff.

Pomfrey was preoccupied keeping his son alive.

Dumbledore arrived last.

"You said it was urgent, Severus?" the headmaster said, sitting at the head of the table.

Severus looked away from the wall. "A student was injured."

"During the tryouts?" McGonagall asked, concerned. "Who?"

“No,” Severus said, turning his gaze on Hagrid. Hagrid flinched, confusion making his face more idiotic. “He went into magically-amplified anaphylaxis in response to a previously unheard of creature.”

“Oh, shit,” Charity muttered, sinking into her seat. “Shit.”

Hagrid’s brow furrowed. “The skrewts? They’re harmless—”

Severus snapped. He slammed his fist on the table. “What in the bloody fuck did you breed those things out of? There is a student currently dying from stepping within thirty feet of those wretched things!”

“What things?” McGonagall demanded.

“Blast-ended skrewts,” Severus said, seething. “The stupidest name I have ever heard.”

“What?” Flitwick asked.

“I swear to god, Hagrid, I will crack your empty head open and claw the information out of that shriveled excuse for a brain if you do not—”

“Severus,” Dumbledore said. “Let him answer.”

“I—I didn’t know that would happen,” Hagrid stuttered. “They’re...I crossed fire crabs and manticores. It—”

“Have you lost your mind?” Severus shouted, standing. Hagrid leaned further away, his eyes wild with panic. “Fire crabs have been banned at Hogwarts for four years *specifically* because Pomfrey did not know how they would interact with his allergy! How could you possibly forget that?”

“Whose allergy?” Lupin asked in the ensuing silence.

“Harry Evans,” Charity said, covering her face. “This can’t be real.”

“Why was Mr. Evans visiting the blast-ended skrewts?” Dumbledore asked.

Severus glared at him. “He apparently expressed concern at their existence, as anyone with a modicum of rationality would. He referred to the Ban on Experimental Breeding, according to Lovegood.”

Charity tugged on his robes, and he reluctantly sat back down.

“Manticores and fire crabs,” Charity said musingly. “Must’ve been a male fire crab and female manticore. What happened to the fire crab?”

“Manticore ate it,” Hagrid mumbled. He looked devastated. “Honestly, professor, I didn’t think—”

“I doubt you are capable of such a feat,” Severus said acidly.

“Follow up question,” Charity said. “Was it a humanoid manticore, or an insectoid manticore? Because if it was humanoid, with a human head, and, you know, human intelligence, then—”

“Thank you, Charity,” Dumbledore said. “How is Mr. Evans?”

Severus took a breath. He was losing his mind. “Stable. He may be transferred to St. Mungo’s. He had a dose of his allergy potion with him, and was able to inject himself just before he suffocated.”

Someone gasped.

“It was the ones that look like big scorpions,” Hagrid said, wiping his face with a large handkerchief. Severus could not comprehend why he was crying. It wasn’t Hagrid’s child who was unconscious in the hospital wing, clinging to life. Again.

“Great, so the ones that grow to the size of a dragon,” Charity said. She placed a hand on Severus’ back. Inexplicably, it made him feel calmer.

“I do not care about the logistics of a fire crab shagging a manticore,” he said. “The skrewts need to be eradicated.”

Hagrid started crying harder.

“Now, Severus,” Dumbledore began.

“A life for a life,” Charity said, nodding to herself.

“What are these skrewts for?” McGonagall asked. “Why do you have them here, Hagrid?”

Hagrid sniffed. “Project for the kids.”

Severus scoffed. “Was the project to see which one died first? Well done, Hagrid. Not a week into term and you’ve finally succeeded in killing a student.”

“It was an accident, Severus,” Dumbledore said calmly. “I very much doubt Hagrid’s intention—”

“Who gives a shit about his intention?” Severus asked, his voice rising with his anger. “What does it matter when it puts students' lives at risk?”

Dumbledore watched him patiently. Severus glared back.

“These...blast-ended skrewts can be relocated for the time being,” Lupin suggested. “Until a final decision is made. Secured, so that no students come in contact with them.”

“I will assist,” Flitwick offered.

“But I haven’t got anything else ready,” Hagrid said, blowing his nose.

Severus gave him a disgusted look. “Are you saying that the entirety of your lesson plan for this year consisted of skrewt husbandry?”

Hagrid hung his head.

“Albus,” McGonagall said, “this is ridiculous. There is far too much going on this year for us to monitor Hagrid’s every move. If he cannot be trusted to actually *teach* students...and one’s life has already been endangered! Don’t get me started on the hippogriff incident from last year...”

Severus stood again. “Remove the skrewts, or I will personally see to it that the species is wiped from the face of the planet.”

He did not wait for a response. He left the room.

The fault lay with Hagrid. Potter could not have known the creatures’ origins. A fire crab and a manticore. Hagrid would be strung up if it got out he was cross breeding an endangered species with XXXXX-classified creatures. And he had hundreds of them.

Severus walked faster. He would dissect the skrewts he captured later. For now, he had to make sure his son was still breathing.

Monty pushed cornflakes around his bowl. He wasn’t hungry. He didn’t look at the Slytherin table. He already knew Harry wasn’t sitting there. He was in the hospital wing, asleep. A magically-induced coma, according to Snape. Monty had snuck in under his invisibility cloak, which hadn’t fooled Snape at all. He had been sitting at Harry’s bedside, like when Harry had been petrified by the basilisk. Just sitting there, waiting for him to wake up. Lady Madeleine was standing guard over him.

“He will get better,” Luna said quietly. She had been crying when they took Harry to the hospital wing.

He jabbed his spoon into the bowl. The skrewts smelled like rotting fish. It had been the first thing Monty noticed. He should have known they might be part fish. They even looked a bit like lobsters.

Hagrid was missing from the head table. The Slytherins were more subdued than usual. The only one he could hear was Malfoy, and someone telling him to shut up.

Monty dropped his spoon. He had finished his Divination homework. He had predictions, the interpretation of his horoscope, for every day that month.

Avoid problems at home by fulfilling your promises.

It was vague in the way divination often was. Monty had no idea what promises he had made.

Harry was a Cancer. Cancer was the crab.

Monty was glad Ron and Hermione weren't sitting next to him. There wasn't room. Neville liked Harry, and Monty had told him what happened. He was sitting on his other side. Hermione had asked Luna to join S.P.E.W. It had made Luna laugh hard enough that milk shot out of her nose. Hermione had been so offended she was sitting at the other end of the table.

“Oh, no,” Neville said. “Gran's sent me another Howler.”

Monty sighed, then looked up as the owls flew into the Great Hall. He spotted the one carrying a red envelope, then did a double take.

“That's not from your gran,” Monty said faintly as Sirius’ recently acquired eagle owl soared towards him. The owl, Aquila, dropped the Howler into Monty's cereal and quickly flew away.

The envelope began to sizzle.

Monty put his head in his hands and groaned. His first class was Herbology. They'd be squeezing pus out of bubotuber pods again.

“Aren't you going to open it?” Neville asked nervously. “It's worse if you don't.”

Sighing, Monty picked up the Howler, shook milk and soggy cornflakes off of it, and walked out of the Great Hall. He walked faster when the envelope began to heat up, then broke into a run, taking the stairs two at a time, slamming into an empty classroom. He fumbled his wand out of his robes, his mind spinning as he tried to remember a spell Harry had taught him.

“*Smyltnes!*” he shouted, just as the Howler exploded.

FLEAMONT JAMES POTTER, Sirius’ voice bellowed. *IT WOULD SERVE YOU RIGHT IF SOMEONE OVERHEARD THIS! YOU BETTER START RUNNING, KID!*

Monty winced at the volume, his heart sinking.

WHAT DO YOU THINK I FOUND WHEN I WENT TO FEED HESTER?

Monty reached into his pocket. Hester slept a lot, but the noise had woken her up.

NOTHING! ABSOLUTELY NOTHING! WHERE IS HER CAGE, MONTY?

“Fuck,” Monty said, sitting heavily in a chair. He laid his head on the desk, listening as Sirius explained in excruciating detail how dangerous occamies were, that he had a mind to tell the headmaster, that he was owling Remus...

“No,” Monty groaned, grabbing his hair. They’d make him send Hester back. Or get rid of her completely. Maybe if they knew he could talk to her, things would be different. But Harry had warned him to tell no one about being a parselmouth. Would he make an exception for Sirius? For Remus?

He couldn’t ask Harry for advice. He was in hospital.

The door to the classroom opened just as the Howler burned itself out. Monty’s ears were ringing, and he felt a headache coming on.

Remus was standing in the doorway, holding a letter and looking supremely disappointed. He frowned, then took out his wand, undoing the charm Monty had cast.

“You would think, after your friend was hurt, that you’d be more cautious when dealing with dangerous creatures,” Remus said, finding a chair and sitting across from Monty.

Monty sniffed, rubbing his face. “She’s not dangerous.”

“You know that isn’t true,” Remus said gently.

“It *is* true,” Monty said, coming to a decision. Remus was a werewolf. He also had a secret that would make his life worse if it got out. “If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell anyone else?”

Remus raised his eyebrows. “It depends on what it is.”

“It’s nothing *bad*,” Monty said. “At least, I don’t think so. But other people might think it is.”

Remus’ face tightened with concern. “What is it? Are you okay?”

“Not really.” Monty took a deep breath, then said, “I’m a parselmouth.”

Monty was allowed to keep Hester, for the time being. Remus said he would write Sirius, but not mention the parselmouth bit. That wasn’t something Monty wanted written down, and Remus agreed that it was wiser to not let anyone know. He had asked for proof, of course, so

Monty had talked to Hester. Remus was more surprised by the parseltongue than by Hester being in his robe pocket.

By the time they were finished talking, the bell had rung and it was time for Herbology. Monty hurried to greenhouse three rather unprepared, all of his school things back in his dormitory. Not that it mattered much. Neville was already there, palpating the bubotuber at their station. Monty joined him, and they spent a rather peaceful class gathering the valuable pus. He noticed they had more bottles than everyone else. Neville had looked up a special technique for increasing the pus yield.

After Herbology, they walked together towards Hagrid's hut at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, where Care of Magical Creatures typically met. But Hagrid wasn't there. Neither were the skrewts. Instead, there was an elderly witch chewing on a pipe.

"Who're you?" Ron asked.

Monty sighed. He had never noticed how rude Ron could be. The Dursleys made everyone else look better in comparison.

The woman nodded at the castle, at the Slytherins reluctantly making their way towards the hut. "I want everyone here before we get started."

"Where's Hagrid?" Hermione asked. She was standing next to Ron.

"Where are the skrewts?" Lavender asked, looking around.

The woman took a drag from her pipe.

Monty liked her already.

Once the Slytherins had joined them, she introduced herself.

"My name is Professor Grubbly-Plank," she said. "I'll be your Care of Magical Creatures teacher this term."

"What happened to Hagrid?" Ron asked again.

She shrugged, taking another puff. "Not my business. Follow me, today's lesson will be at the lake."

Monty shared a look with Neville, but followed Professor Grubbly-Plank as she marched towards the banks of the Black Lake.

"At least there's no skrewts today," he heard Dean say. Dean had got burned by a skrewt blasting off during their first lesson. No one liked the skrewts. Monty still thought they were interesting, but knew no one, not even Hagrid, could safely handle the things. They were deadly.

The only reason Harry had asked about the blast-ended skrewts was because he was suspicious of where they had come from. He knew Harry had talked to Hagrid about the

flobberworms, which were incredibly boring. Hagrid had become better at teaching after that, in the sense that he showed them different creatures.

“We’re going to start off with murtlaps,” Professor Grubbly-Plank announced. She had waded out into the water, and plunged her hand in. When she straightened, she held a very wet rat, covered in tentacles. “Professor Sprout tells me you’re working with bubotubers. Bubotuber pus is a common ingredient in potions that treat afflictions of the skin. It’s caustic when undiluted. Adding essence of murtlap,” she said, holding the tentacled rat up, “balances it out. Essence of murtlap can also be used on minor abrasions and other superficial wounds. Now, I want everyone to join me in the shallows.”

Monty tentatively put a foot in the water. It was cold, but not awfully so.

“Oh, right, fourth-years,” Professor Grubbly-Plank said, noticing their hesitation. She pulled her wand out. “Best spell your robes impervious. I’ll teach you the spell so you can do it yourselves...”

A few minutes later, Monty was knee deep in the water, watching as Neville worked up the courage to examine the plants growing under the surface.

“Murtlaps prefer marine environments—salt water,” Professor Grubbly-Plank said. “The colony we’ve got here migrated inland, oh, eighty years ago. They make their warrens among the reeds...”

The skrewt exploded in Severus’ hand. He made another note, then set the foul creature back in its crate. The only thing that would save the beast would be if it held the secrets to a cure for Harry’s allergy.

Perhaps he would force Hagrid to eat them all. Raw.

The house-elves had been mobilized to rid the castle and grounds of any essence of skrewt. The skrewts themselves had been relocated to somewhere in the Forbidden Forest, the area charmed, enchanted, and runed by Flitwick and Babbling. The best news Severus had received was that the skrewts were taking matters into their own appendages and killing each other off.

His own experiments were taking place in a clean room, deep in the dungeons, far away from the hospital wing. He wouldn’t risk Harry’s safety. That the mere scent of the skrewts had caused such a severe reaction was alarming.

Severus turned to the writhing skrewt he had pinned down. He had attempted to sedate the skrewt, but the creatures had some resistance to magic, even newly hatched. It did not bode well for what the skrewts would eventually grow into. He did need to study the skrewts while

they were still alive, so he turned to the books he had acquired on fire crabs and insectoid manticores. There had to be some way of subduing the blasted things.

When Harry opened his eyes again, it was to a face full of fur.

“Move,” he said, voice muffled. Lady Madeleine moved, but not away from his face.

Harry rolled over on his back, brushing stray cat hairs from his face. He was in the hospital wing, which was good. He was alive, which was better.

“Fucking skrewts,” he muttered, closing his eyes in frustration. “How long have I been here?”

“Meow.”

“Wonderful,” he said, pushing himself upright. He glanced at the week’s worth of homework set on the table next to his hospital bed.

“Meow,” Lady Madeleine chastised, climbing onto his lap to stare into his face.

“That’s a good idea,” Harry said, stroking her back. “You have a better sense of smell.”

He heard the click of Madam Pomfrey’s heels as she rushed out of her office.

“Mr. Evans,” she said, taking her wand out. “You should still be resting!”

“I was bored,” Harry said, smirking at her appalled reaction.

“Be that as it may,” she said, placing a hand on his forehead, “you’ll be staying here over the weekend.”

“The whole weekend?” Harry said. “But I’ve got gobstones!”

Madam Pomfrey leaned back to frown at him. “Gobstones can wait.”

“Blasphemy,” Harry whispered as she walked away.

“I heard that!”

“Captain...”

“Silence, Avery.”

Killian sighed wearily, but closed his mouth. Harry was not strictly allowed to host the first gobstones meeting in the hospital wing, but he had also not been told that he couldn't.

“Glad you're awake, Captain,” Tracey said, Vincent nodding at her side.

Harry surveyed his team. Killian was a given, as were Tracey and Vincent. Bridget and Ethan were solid players, and dedicated to the team. Derek was their rising star. Graham was their latest addition, Bridget's younger brother. They were building a gobstones legacy.

Some, such as the Carrow twins Flora and Hestia, eschewed the path that had been forged for them. Harry looked at the photograph of Eileen Prince set on his bedside table, then looked over his team again. There was one more person, who was busy snooping around the hospital wing. Harry wasn't entirely sure why Mafalda had come along. Curiosity, he assumed.

“I have some announcements to make, before we begin stoning,” Harry said. “First, there will be no round-robin this year. Second, we will be having tournament team selections before Easter holiday, as opposed to after. Finally, nothing could stop me from playing gobstones. No skrewt,” he said, noting how Tracey and Vincent recoiled, “no duration in the hospital wing, not even Merlin himself could get in my way. He would have to pry the stones from my cold, dead hands.”

“Fuck's sake, Harry,” Killian muttered. “You know Charity wants me to send the meeting minutes to her. That's the only reason you're like this.”

“Tracey, from now on you'll be taking minutes,” Harry said. Killian sagged in relief. “Now, Madam Pomfrey is going to notice you lot aren't at dinner pretty soon, so let's push these beds out of the way and play some damn gobstones.”

Chapter End Notes

Palmetto bugs (big ass cockroaches) are my skrewt. If I see those fuckers flying at me, it's on sight

(I catch them and put them outside)

Running Interference

Chapter Summary

September 1994

The doors of the hospital shut behind Killian, leaving Harry alone once more. He leaned back in his bed, coughed, then winced. He raised a hand, turning it over to examine. It shook. Harry put his hand back down and closed his eyes. He had been in the hospital wing for the entire school week. The cover story for his extended stay was a mass skrewt attack. It carried an element of truth, though he had never actually seen the skrewts. Being swarmed by hundreds of skrewt hatchlings, their bums exploding, rendering him unconscious. What a joke.

Harry sighed, then coughed again. Cats were good at hiding their pain. Lady Madeleine had found a knarl in his dad's back garden over the summer. They looked like evil hedgehogs. She killed it, and a quill had become stuck between her paw pads. She didn't so much as limp, and Harry hadn't known about it until he happened to touch the area.

He felt like shit. The hives had receded, and he smelt like a petrol station. Some concoction with bubotuber pus had been spread over him. His throat was raw; Madam Pomfrey explained in gruesome detail what had been done to keep him alive. She had to force his throat open to pump air into his lungs. There was a pitcher of a pale amber liquid next to his bed, which she had urged him to drink before she left for dinner. It tasted strongly of chamomile, and was cool and soothing. Killian had set the picture of Harry's scowling grandmother next to it for their meeting.

All of his bones and muscles ached. Mental discipline helped him ignore it, made it more distant and detached, but it couldn't heal him. The pain was still there. He could get through a half hour of speed gobstones. He could act like everything was fine.

Something tapped on one of the hospital wing windows. It sounded like little pebbles being thrown at it. Harry didn't feel up to investigating, and Lady Madeleine would have done something if she felt threatened, but he nevertheless looked over to see what it was.

It was a small, furious, drab bird.

Harry scrambled for his wand, abandoned the idea of using it, his magic lashing out to close the curtains, but it was too late. The window opened, and footsteps approached his bed. The curtains flew open again, and Severus Snape glared down at him, his face lined with displeasure.

It was so quiet one could hear a gobstone drop.

“I should take your badge,” his dad said. “What possessed you? You foolish boy. Pomfrey told you to *rest*.”

Harry flopped down on his bed, grimacing as his head spun with the sudden movement. “I’m tired.”

“You have been asleep for nearly six days.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Harry said softly. He coughed again, and scrunched his face up. It hurt to talk. “I’m tired of being sick.”

His dad sat down, and was a total dick about it since he chose the side Harry was facing. Harry relaxed slightly as he watched his dad cast silencing charms, spells that would ensure his privacy.

“We have no idea what the long-term consequences may be,” his dad said. “I have begun researching the skrewts. I will find a solution.”

“What are they?” Harry asked, finally looking at his dad.

His dad was visibly exhausted, but his expression hardened. “That oaf crossbred fire crabs and manticores.”

Harry sat up slightly, then gave it up as a bad idea. “The ones with human faces?”

His dad snorted. “You weren’t the only one wondering that. No, not even Hagrid is that depraved.”

“I was wondering why we never did anything with fire crabs in potions,” Harry said. He reached for the chamomile infusion, awkwardly sipping at it sideways.

“In your second year,” his dad said, “you had an allergic reaction to a chocolate that contained peanuts. Pomfrey became aware of your allergies, and accommodations were made.”

“I thought so,” Harry said, closing his eyes. “The food at our table changed.”

His dad sighed. “Why is this here?”

Harry opened his eyes again, glancing at his grandmother’s photograph. “Killian brought it. She’s sort of a mascot, I suppose.”

“She would have hated that,” his dad said, picking up the framed *Daily Prophet* clipping. “I shall return it to your gobstones den.”

“You won’t really take my badge, will you?” Harry asked.

“Of course not,” his dad said. He hesitated, then placed a hand on Harry’s head. “I have no desire to sow discord among my own house.”

Harry coughed, then closed his eyes once more. “What happened to the skrewts?”

“They have been contained deep within the Forbidden Forest,” his dad said. “The headmaster negotiated with the centaurs. They were reluctant, as some of Hagrid’s other pets have sought refuge in the forest. Including an acromantula. An acromantula for whom Hagrid acquired a mate. The centaurs have been fighting their offspring for decades.”

Harry covered his face. “Please tell me he got sacked.”

“He has been relieved of his teaching duties,” his dad said, sounding vexed, “but the headmaster has retained Hagrid as gamekeeper. The new instructor, Grubbly-Plank, is a vast improvement. The students are receiving an adequate education.”

“All my wildest dreams have come true,” Harry said, pulling the blanket over himself. Lady Madeleine shifted at the foot of his bed. “Maddie’s going to train.”

His dad patted his head, then stood.

“You have become nonsensical. I shall take my leave.”

“Night, dad,” Harry mumbled.

There was a pause, then his dad said, “Goodnight, Harry.”

Harry woke again in the middle of the night, his heart pounding. The hospital wing was dark, quiet, and empty. His dad had left the window open, and curtains fluttered in the cool night breeze. The gibbous moon hung low in the sky, casting long, murky shadows in the room.

“Percy,” he breathed, trying to sit up. Someone had put him in his muggle pajamas, boxer shorts and an old shirt. The letter had been in his robes.

Lady Madeleine was awake, watching him with lambent eyes. She jumped off of the bed and silently padded away. Minutes later she returned, a scroll held in her mouth. She deposited it in Harry’s lap, then stared at him expectantly.

Harry scratched her ears. He had been saving Percy’s letter to read when he was in his dormitory, after dinner. The skrewts had interfered. Once Lady Madeleine was satisfied, Harry unrolled the parchment.

Honored Prefect Evans,

There are many things I wish to say to you, and few I dare memorialize. It would be unseemly for one so intimately involved in the organization and implementation of the Triwizard Tournament to correspond with a potential Champion.

Harry frowned. He *had* said to Percy that the monetary prize was tempting, and that it was a shame he would be ineligible to enter. And now it was open to sixth-years, provided they had permission from their guardians. Percy knew heads of house acted *in loco parentis*. There was no reason for Percy to think Harry would not wish to participate. It was clear that Percy believed that, if Harry did enter, he would be chosen.

Blushing, he continued reading.

However, I cannot tolerate the thought of losing your companionship. We need not discuss the Tournament. It would be unprofessional, and violative of the vows I took upon assuming this position, to share any knowledge about the upcoming events with you. I apologize in advance, as I know how you chafe when information is denied to you. My sole hope is that you do not begrudge me this indulgence.

On a more personal note, I have successfully purchased muggle goods, using muggle legal tender. I have attached a sticker one item came with. It reminded me of you.

Yours,

Junior Secretary Weasley

PS Please forward the attached letters to Madam Pomfrey and Charles Weasley. You have my deepest gratitude.

PPS My most sincere thanks for your tip regarding Longbottom's cauldrons.

PPPS I miss you too.

Harry laid back down, rereading the letter, smiling so wide it made his cheeks hurt.

Harry was set free after spending another week in the hospital wing. His dad had snitched to Madam Pomfrey, who was equally unamused by him straining himself. They also wanted to ensure he would not come in contact with anything skrewt-related again. Lady Madeleine was on alert, now familiar with their smell.

His deliverance happened to align with the first quidditch game of the year. Harry had the impression he was sequestered for a few more days than necessary to maximize the emotional impact his return had. His friends, who comprised half of the quidditch team, had been morose during his absence. His appearance in the Great Hall had been met with ebullience.

It was a clear day, with a crisp breeze that made the house pennants fly proudly about the pitch. On the pitch, Astrid had a finger raised, testing the wind. Cassius, a starting chaser now that Marcus Flint had graduated, was cloud gazing. In the Ravenclaw stands, Luna raised a flag she had drawn on, depicting a black snake riding a golden lion.

“I’m signing up for Care,” Phoebe said, stroking the diaphanous wings her frog Felipe now had.

“Same,” Jasmine said. “You missed it, Harry, but everyone’s been talking about how brilliant Professor Grubbly-Plank is. Annabeth mentioned it during the prefect meeting.”

“It’s much better now that Hagrid’s gone,” Phoebe added.

There hadn’t been a single Slytherin sixth-year who had signed up for Care of Magical Creatures after getting their O.W.L.s. The seventh-years, who had enrolled before learning Kettleburn had retired, were stuck. Either they dropped the class, abandoned the N.E.W.T., and chalked their sixth-year class up to wasted time, or they went forward with Hagrid. Neither option was ideal.

“He’s not exactly gone,” Harry said, nodding towards the Gryffindor stands, where Hagrid took up several seats. Ron and Hermione were sitting next to him.

Harry imagined it was a real blow to Ron’s ego to not be on the team. Monty had only ridden a broom once when he was made seeker, no tryout required. He had just learned about magic a few weeks before that. Ron, on the other hand, had grown up in a magical, quidditch-playing family. The only position he had any hope of attaining was keeper, the same position his older brothers forced him to play.

Maybe Percy would have some idea about what to do. Harry knew how uncomfortable Monty was. Ron was his first friend, they shared a dormitory, they had almost all of the same classes. Ron was academically disinterested, and Harry had heard him loudly complaining about classes in the Great Hall more times than he could count.

To be fair, everyone complained.

Percy had spoken of his own frustration, that Ron wanted things but didn't want to put in the necessary effort. Harry didn't know what to make of that. Ron's older brothers were variously prefects, Head Boys, star quidditch players, funny, popular. It was a lot to live up to.

Monty was much more serious about his education, at the top of his year in Defense Against the Dark Arts, Care of Magical Creatures, Potions, and Transfiguration. Harry was convinced his brother could come first in all of his courses, if he wanted to. All that in addition to being the lynchpin player on his house's quidditch team, and, more onerously, the Boy Who Lived.

Harry doubted anyone else was comparing Ron to Monty, other than Ron himself. He knew how Cassius felt about him being at the top of their class for their entire Hogwarts career, about him being chosen as prefect. They never talked about it, but there was an undercurrent of acrimony that made Harry wonder if their friendship would survive graduation. It would only get worse if Harry was named Head Boy.

"Have you spoken to Professor Snape about it?" Harry asked, watching as the quidditch balls were released. The snitch vanished.

"We did," Jasmine said, picking stitches out of her embroidery. She was making an occamy. "It was strange. Usually he would be annoyed by a request like that, since he's already done the time tables."

"Oh, he loathes Hagrid," Phoebe said gleefully. "Those screw-its attacked his favorite student."

"Skrewts," Harry said absently, watching as his brother rose into the air. Harry was curious how his play style would change in response to seeing the Quidditch World Cup, and Astrid's torture sessions. Would he still be locked in the idea that seekers were meant to catch the snitch and nothing else? Would he start running interference for the chasers, lure bludgers, use more feints?

Monty's talent and Terence's experience made them a good match. It was anyone's guess who would catch the snitch, though Monty had the support of three houses to buoy him. Terence had to take the Firebolt's speed into consideration. His broom could not keep up with the Firebolt if Monty saw the snitch first. Terence wasn't a passive seeker, though, and his movements around the field drew Monty's attention.

In previous years, whoever caught the snitch would have decided the game. The Slytherin and Gryffindor chasers and keepers had been evenly matched. Oliver Wood had signed with Puddlemore straight out of school, and Astrid was on that same trajectory. Fred and George were more in sync than Lucian and Peregrine, but the Slytherin beaters were bulkier and more bloodthirsty than the twins, and they had better brooms.

"Beater Bole takes a swing for Chaser Bell, Beater Weasley intercepts," Lee Jordan said, his voice echoing across the pitch. "Chaser Pucey is doing something on his broom...never mind that, this is a family friendly game, and Chaser Johnson takes possession..."

The Gryffindor chasers flew in an arrow, breaking through with the quaffle in possession, trying to pass it quickly so as to confuse Astrid. A classic Gryffindor play, with Angelina Johnson in the lead, Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet fanned out behind her. The lead chaser never took the shot in that formation, and typically the quaffle ended up with Alicia.

Astrid knew the Gryffindor playbook better than the Gryffindors. It didn't work. Alicia had excellent aim, but Astrid was already in position. As soon as the quaffle touched her hands, she dropped it to Graham Montague as he flew beneath her.

Amazingly, the sturdy Cormac McLaggen had flown away from the Gryffindor hoops to yell at Alicia. Graham threw the quaffle at Fred Weasley's head, causing him to miss the bludger he was aiming for. Cassius snatched the quaffle out of the air and raced towards the unprotected hoops. The quaffle easily sailed in. Katie Bell tried to take possession, but had to duck the bludger Fred had missed. Adrian caught the quaffle, and Slytherin scored another goal.

"Twenty-nought, Slytherin," Lee Jordan said miserably. "Keeper McLaggen, new on the team, showing us all why bigger is *not* better."

"Jordan!" Professor McGonagall roared.

"For keepers, Professor!"

It was one of the rarest deciding factors for a quidditch match. This was a keepers game, and Gryffindor was getting slaughtered. Peregrine and Lucian didn't bother aiming for the Gryffindor chasers, who were falling apart at the seams from Cormac McLaggen's lack of support. He was too busy yelling at them, and Angelina was too busy trying to get him under control to captain the rest of her team. Bludgers were exclusively aimed at Monty, who was zooming over the pitch in a wild manner, trying to scatter the Slytherin chasers. It left Terence free to look for the snitch, while Slytherin continued racking up points.

"Stop calling for a red card, Dean, that doesn't exist in quidditch!" Lee Jordan shouted into his bullhorn. "And, splendid, Warrington's got the quaffle again. Rarely have we seen a sloth play quidditch so gracefully."

"Piss off, Jordan!" Astrid shouted.

"This is embarrassing," Phoebe said, covering Felipe's innocent eyes.

"They should have put that other Weasley up there," Jasmine said, not looking away from her embroidery hoop. "Or anyone who respected the new captain."

Harry got out a book. *Magical Moral Perspectives*, which Percy had given him. It was a fascinating exploration of morality in spellcrafting, and in spellcasting. Most of their schooling was concerned with whether they *could* do something, not if they *should*.

The game limped along. Angelina called time out. Harry couldn't make out her words, but she was clearly shouting at McLaggen, who the entire team was facing down. Harry doubted

he would respond well to them ganging up on him, and it was far too late for any change in his behavior to make a difference.

Minutes after the game resumed, Monty spotted the snitch.

“And...yes! Potter’s seen the snitch. Higgs is on his tail, but he’s too far behind! Beater Weasley takes a hit, Higgs swerves...nice one, Fred! Potter’s got the snitch! Final score, two hundred seventy to two hundred thirty, Slytherin...wins.”

Harry watched his brother land on the pitch, holding the struggling snitch in his hand. His teammates landed around him, and now Angelina was yelling at Monty. Monty bore it stoically, and eventually she turned her anger on McLaggen.

It had been the right move. If the game went on any longer, it ran the risk of a greater point disparity. Monty had needed to end it quickly to give Gryffindor a chance at the Cup.

Throughout the stands there were cries of outrage, demands to know why Monty had caught the snitch. Ron was shouting at Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan, joined by Neville of all people. Were they defending Monty?

Somehow, Luna evaded Madam Hooch and ran towards Monty, her strange flag fluttering behind her. Harry watched his brother smile broadly when he noticed her, the irritation of his teammates forgotten.

Frowning thoughtfully, Harry tucked his book away, following his friends onto the pitch to congratulate the victors.

Harry had been recovering in the infirmary during the week leading up to the full moon. Severus had told Lupin he could brave the dungeons and get the potion for himself. Lupin happily agreed. He had discovered the key to annoying Severus: being pleasant.

So, while he was enjoying a quiet evening in his office, his Slytherins preoccupied with celebrating their quidditch victory, there was an unwelcome knock on his door.

“Enter,” he said.

Lupin entered, a smile on his face. “Good evening, Severus.”

“A matter of opinion,” Severus said, looking pointedly at the steaming goblet on his desk. Seven evenings he had been forced to interact with Lupin. What could he offer Harry in exchange for facilitating the Wolfsbane transaction? Or perhaps not Harry. His emotional outbursts regarding the boy’s welfare were out of character for him. As much as Harry needed to distance himself from Potter, Severus needed to distance himself from Harry. He did not want his son to be caught up in whatever the Dark Lord planned. He had two of Lily’s sons to protect.

“I do appreciate you brewing this,” Lupin said, taking a small sip of the Wolfsbane. Severus narrowed his eyes. Harry had mentioned how the man lingered over the potion, almost masochistic in drawing out its consumption.

“As I have told you multiple times, do not mention it,” Severus said.

“How is Harry?” Lupin asked.

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Alive, for the time being. Perhaps Hagrid’s next acquisition will be a *shen*. The Black Lake could only be improved by a giant, shape-shifting clam. It could cast a mirage of a competent administration, and spare me from witnessing any further idiocy.”

Lupin smiled wryly, taking another sip. “I do have a serious question for you, if you don’t mind.”

Severus regarded him coolly. He did mind.

“The headmaster has made a request of me,” Lupin said, taking a seat uninvited.

“The headmaster makes many requests,” Severus said.

Lupin sighed. “He wishes for me to cast the Imperius on the fourth-years, to train them how to resist it.”

Severus snorted. “He doesn’t ask for much, does he?”

He had always despised the Imperius curse. In their fifth year, Mulciber had cast it on Lily’s friend, Mary Macdonald. He forced her to remove and burn her robes, while his friends watched and laughed. It had continued to be Mulciber’s favorite spell throughout school, with more opportunities for him to cast it during the war. All in the name of the Dark Lord. And he was in Azkaban for it. He had never met his son, currently a second-year in Slytherin.

“As I’m sure you can tell, I have misgivings,” Lupin said. The Wolfsbane belched a cloud of foul blue smoke, and Lupin wrinkled his nose. “But I agreed.”

“Of course you did,” Severus muttered. Lupin had a noodle in lieu of a spine. “What is your question, Lupin?”

Lupin grimaced. “I’ve never cast it before, and I was hoping for some advice.”

Severus silently watched Lupin continue to drink the Wolfsbane.

“You assumed,” he said, “based on an alleged previous affiliation, that I would be familiar with that spell? Not only that I would know it, but that I would have cast it?”

Lupin looked up from the goblet. “Well, have you?”

Severus let the silence drag out. After some time he finally responded, “Yes.”

Parental Guidance

Chapter Summary

October 1994

Chapter Notes

I changed the name of Sirius' owl :)

Thank you all again for the comments! It's hard to not respond sometimes. It motivates me to write more.

I'm not a huge fan of multiple POVs, but I think it's been beneficial to the story. Especially one that is turning out to be very, very long.

Muriel Prewett did not live in Godric's Hollow proper. She was much too prestigious for that. Featherby House, the Prewett family's ancestral home, was a sprawling estate. It dominated its piece of unspoilt countryside, a gabled manor in buff, grey stone, flanked by perfectly symmetrical cross wings.

Percy apparated to the Ministry-designated point, located in the village square. The monument built to honor Lily and James Potter was one of the most popular tourist attractions in magical Britain. Percy took a few moments to appreciate the Potter Memorial. From a distance, it appeared as an obelisk carved with the names of those killed in a muggle war. Up close, to a magical eye, the statue depicted a smiling man and a woman, holding an unblemished and giggling infant.

In the weeks since the Quidditch World Cup, there had been an increase in visitors. Flowers enchanted to never wilt, coins, ribbons, messages written on parchment, a small figurine of a stag, a snitch, all surrounded the statue like offerings placed on an altar. A way to acknowledge the dead, their sacrifice, the hope Monty Potter embodied with his survival. Desperate pleas that the Dark Lord Voldemort was dead and gone, and would never return.

The people wanted reassurance which the Ministry failed to provide. His father's careless words were strangely prescient, foretelling the Ministry's response as a whole. The perpetrators had not been caught. It was messily swept under the rug; the muggles were obliviated and forgotten, those clamoring for compensation were silenced with galleons. The Triwizard Tournament had been announced, refocusing the public's interest. Someone from Magical Maintenance would inevitably be sent out to deal with the offerings around Potter

Memorial. They were too poignant a reminder of the fear that had gripped them all mere weeks before.

Percy took one last look at the smiling baby cradled protectively in his mother's arms, so different from his brother's friend, then began walking down the road that would take him out of Godric's Hollow.

The exterior of Featherby House was much more impressive by day than when one was fleeing under the cover of darkness. Percy's most recent visits had been brief, and against his will. He had forgotten how overwhelming the manor house was. It began at the moat, a wide waterway that encircled the vast property. The manor's house-elves kept the grounds in good order, but the moat was still choked with weeds in which grindylows lurked. They bared their algae-green fangs at Percy as he crossed the bridge. They were more a defense against muggles than any magical person. For the latter, a pygmy kraken lurked in the fish pond. The iconic geese of Featherby House were hardened, honking warriors.

Percy slapped away a questing tendril of devil's snare as he walked up the garden path, approaching the less formidable southern side of the house. The plant snatched up a garden gnome instead, and Percy grimaced at the gnome's loud protestations, the panicked gurgling as it was strangled, the sound of its snapping bones, and the eerie silence that followed.

Great-Aunt Muriel was oblivious to this. She was sitting on the terrace, under a white-washed pergola covered in flowering, non-carnivorous vines in which several fairies played hide-and-seek. Her favorite house-elf, Nesty, was serving tea.

"Percival," Aunt Muriel croaked. "You took your time getting here. Did you have to get your mother's permission?"

"My apologies, Auntie," Percy said, joining her at the table. It was wrought iron, with an intricate filigree so fine in appearance it looked transfigured from lace. It was a relic, one of many in the vast collection of riches accumulated over the centuries. Generations of Prewetts should have called Featherby Manor home, but there was only Aunt Muriel.

"If *sorry* fixed anything we wouldn't need aurors," she said dismissively, turning to scrutinize the house-elf. "Nesty, you made this the muggle way?"

Nesty, who was dressed like a little maid and not in the usual semi-nudity of house-elves, nodded. "Nesty did her best!"

"Thank you," Percy said. Nesty squeaked, nearly dropping a tray of finger sandwiches. Aunt Muriel laughed wheezily.

"How is that Slytherin boy of yours?" she asked once she caught her breath.

Percy looked towards the thrashing devil's snare, which was under siege by outrage garden gnomes, and sighed. There was no use pretending he didn't know who she was referring to. "He is doing well."

Aunt Muriel grunted, picking up a sandwich and giving it a sniff. “Augusta heard from her grandson that the boy was attacked.”

“He is fine,” Percy said. “It was an encounter with some novel illegal crossbreed. Fire crabs and insectoid manticores.” Harry had underlined *insectoid* in his letter, as if there was any doubt. “The creatures have since been removed.”

Aunt Muriel cackled. “I heard Hagrid got the boot. Never made sense to me why Albus kept him around after that muggleborn girl died.”

Percy set down his tea. “What muggleborn girl?”

Aunt Muriel frowned. “Come to think of it...it must have been the basilisk.” She sat back, a disturbing smile twisting her face. “Hagrid was innocent.” She started laughing again, so hard that she began coughing. Nesty appeared to thoroughly pound Aunt Muriel’s back.

“Merlin, I can’t wait to tell the girls,” she rasped. “So, your Slytherin boy—”

“Harry,” Percy said.

Aunt Muriel scoffed. “I refuse to believe anyone named their son *Harry*. What is his full name?”

Percy knew what it was. Harry had signed a letter with it once. “Henry Samuel Evans.”

Aunt Muriel grew pensive. “A muggleborn...”

“Why does that matter?” Percy asked.

“It may not,” Aunt Muriel said ponderously, as if thinking aloud. Her attention snapped to Percy again. “Is Henry entering this Tournament? The *Daily Prophet* said they’re allowing sixth-years. He *is* a sixth-year, is he not?”

“Yes,” Percy said.

“Very interesting,” Aunt Muriel said. “The rumors had it that only wizards of age could enter. Suddenly, they’re allowing all sixth-years!”

“Fascinating,” Percy said. He chose a sandwich at random and ate it. He didn’t fully trust Aunt Muriel, but he did trust her house-elves to follow her orders. It was an inviolable truth of house-elf magic, poorly understood as it was. If Nesty said she had made muggle food, she had made muggle food.

“Well?” Aunt Muriel prompted.

“He said he is considering entering,” Percy said. “It would be beneficial to his career.”

“And what career is that?”

“Harry,” he said, stressing the name, “is a spellcrafter.”

“It would be good for both of you if he wins,” she said. There was an evil glint in her eyes. “Have you thought about children?”

Percy choked on his sandwich.

By the time Aunt Muriel had exhausted herself, the sun had begun to set.

“I’ll expect you next Sunday, Percival,” she commanded as she hobbled towards the house.

Percy waited until she was inside, then made his way back to Godric's Hollow. He had told his mother he was going into the office, and to expect him home late. If he told her he was visiting Aunt Muriel, she might have invited herself along. Or would have apparated to Featherby House to take him home herself.

Percy walked down the quiet road, trying to put his thoughts in some order. A jogger passed him by, indifferent to a teenager wearing robes while walking about the countryside. The muggles of Godric’s Hollow were accustomed to their neighbors’ idiosyncrasies.

In the past, when the Triwizard Tournament had been held every five years, the winners went down in history. It was a legacy nearly seven hundred years old. Eternal glory. Harry would be a household name, a celebrity. He would be feted, doors would open to him, even as a muggleborn. His social status would skyrocket.

Harry would be the ideal partner for a Minister for Magic.

Percy’s steps faltered. It had not been his intention, he hadn’t even thought of it until Aunt Muriel made her remark. But now, the idea had insidiously burrowed itself in his mind.

“If Henry wins, it would be good for both of you.”

Monty was feeling more friendly towards Ron. The weekend after their first game hadn’t been great. No one was happy they had lost, and everyone was sick of Cormac McLaggen. Angelina threatened to kick him off the team. Monty wished she had gone through with it. In a way, Monty was glad it was him and not Ron who had embarrassed them.

When people complained about Monty getting the snitch despite being behind, Ron had stepped up to defend him. There was no way they could have caught up to Slytherin in points, not with McLaggen acting like a twat. Ron went so far as to compare Monty to Viktor Krum, which was ridiculous but got his point across. Seekers had to make quick decisions, and a lot of weight rested on whether they caught the snitch. Monty had made the best decision he could given the circumstances.

His favorable impression of Ron diminished slightly during their Divination lesson. Neville had started sitting at their table during class, which was a relief as he also took it seriously. Of the other Gryffindors, Lavender and Parvati were extreme in their devotion to Professor Trelawney. Monty's estimation of her was complicated. He knew she was a Seer, but she was also putting on a show. Dean and Seamus were more Ron's speed; they thought it was all rubbish too.

"I have finished grading your first homework assignment," Professor Trelawney said, her beads clacking ominously as she lifted the stack of parchment like a baby lion. Monty was surprised she didn't have music on, though perhaps it would make the classroom too much like a disco. A very lethargic disco. "Only one of you has turned their Inner Eye unflinchingly to the darkness within! I can only hope that the rest of you will learn to face your destinies with grim determination. Alas, that is something I cannot teach you."

Monty glanced at Neville, who had gone pale. Perhaps he took Divination a little too seriously.

"Ronald Weasley!" Professor Trelawney cried out.

Ron jerked upright, and began sliding off of his pouffe chair. "Yes?"

Professor Trelawney's glasses flashed as she turned her heavy gaze on Ron, and she began reading out his predictions. Ron's completely made-up predictions. Ron looked as baffled as Monty was at first, but quickly accepted that he had in fact received top marks for his homework.

For a moment, Monty considered telling on him.

Ron had succeeded by appealing to Professor Trelawney's love of tragedy. The more grisly the fate, the better. It didn't matter that none of Ron's *predictions* had come to fruition. He hadn't been drowned, or trampled by a rampaging hippogriff. Everyone else in the class knew he was full of it. A few were even laughing as Professor Trelawney continued hamming it up, while the true believers hung on every word. She was playing to that audience, and rewarded Ron for giving her good material. Perhaps she even suspected Ron hadn't done the actual work required, and didn't care.

Monty looked at the table, breathing steadily, letting go of his irritation. It didn't matter. He would still put in the work. He wasn't doing it for Professor Trelawney, or Ron. He was doing it for himself.

Attending Hogwarts was one of the best things to happen to him. It saved him from the Dursleys. It saved his life. He wasn't a useless nobody with deadbeat parents, with no hope of escaping the oppressive malaise of Little Whinging. He was a wizard. Knowing that magic was real, getting to do magic, *being* magic. Why would he want to fake it?

Monty's irritation returned by dinnertime. Ron had been smug after the effusive praise he received during Divination. Monty knew it was rare for Ron to be complimented on anything during class. They'd been doing hedgehogs-to-pincushions in Transfiguration, and other than Monty, only Hermione had got it. Ron's pincushion had wet itself in fright.

It reminded Monty of how Ron had acted after Sirius stabbed his bed curtains. It was his five minutes of fame. For once in his life, it was all about Ron Weasley. Of course, Ron didn't think about what fame might cost someone. Their parents, for example.

Neville kept shooting him nervous looks on their way to dinner. Ron was distracted enough to not notice Monty hadn't spoken since class. That was another thing about Ron. He didn't know how to be bored. He'd never been stuck in a cupboard for hours, sometimes days, on end. He needed constant entertainment, or he'd start whining.

It wasn't until Monty was sitting at the Gryffindor table, food appearing like a miracle, that he understood what he was feeling.

He was jealous.

He was jealous of Ron having parents, of him having brothers, of having always been cared for, always been loved. Monty didn't have that. He didn't have a happy family. He didn't have anyone to rely on. He'd only ever had himself.

A *hoot* broke him out of his dismal thoughts. He looked up and saw Sirius' huge eagle owl, Aquila, flying towards him. A small brown package was in her claws. She glided silently towards him, and Monty hastily cleared space for her to land.

"Who's that from?" Hermione asked, looking up from her book. Monty read the cover, which depicted a creature similar to a house-elf, but with a crueler face. *The Decline of Western Domestic Spirits*. He made a note to ask her about it later.

Aquila landed, blocking his view.

"Sirius," Monty said, untying the package. It was the size and shape of a thin book, and thickly wrapped. Aquila seized a black pudding and flew away, ignoring Ron's indignant shout. The package had a note attached, and Monty opened that first.

Open in private.

"What is it?" Ron asked, leaning over to look. Monty quickly put the note away. "Didn't he send you a Howler last week? What was that about?"

"I forgot," Monty said absently, putting the package into one of his robe pockets. He knew he should apologize to Sirius for misleading him about *why* he had wanted them enlarged, but the pockets were dead useful.

Monty got up, glancing at the Slytherin table. Harry was there, sitting with his friends. He felt a flash of jealousy again. He knew there were good reasons to not be friends with someone in Slytherin, especially someone who had a Death Eater parent. Had they been at the Quidditch World Cup, torturing muggles? Did Harry know? Monty didn't dare ask.

“I’ve got to ask Professor Lupin about something,” Monty said, glad Remus had skipped dinner. He was still recovering from the full moon. “I’ll see you in the common room.”

“See you,” Neville said, sounding worried. Monty smiled reassuringly, which put Neville at ease.

Once he was out of the Great Hall, Monty raced through the castle, taking shortcuts hidden behind tapestries, vaulting across moving staircases, dodging a vase dropped by Peeves, until he got to Gryffindor Tower. He might not have brothers, but he did have Harry. He might not have any parents, but he did have Sirius and Remus. It was more than he ever hoped for.

Monty hurried through the empty common room, took the stairs to his dormitory two at a time, jumped into bed, and spelled his curtains shut. Privacy was extremely important when you lived with four other teenage boys; Monty wished the rest of them would work that out. He took a minute to get his breathing under control, for his heart to settle down, then unwrapped the package from Sirius.

It was a mirror. The frame was an ornate floral design in antique silver. The mirror itself was a purer silver, its surface polished and unblemished. Curious, Monty looked at himself for a moment, flattened his disobedient hair over his scar. He turned the mirror over, and found a note spellotaped to the back.

Sorry for not writing back right away, it took me a while to find this. It’s a two-way mirror, which your dad and I used when we got separate detentions. Remus said you wanted to speak to me in person. You just have to say my name. I’m here whenever you need me.

Monty’s eyes started to well up. He took his glasses off and brushed the tears away. He was too old to be crying over something like this, even if it was everything he wanted. An adult. Someone he could trust. Someone he could rely on. Someone who would be there for him, no matter what.

It took a while for Monty to calm down. When he did, he put his glasses back on and said, “Sirius Black.”

“Meow.”

Harry nodded, then transfigured the dungeon corridor so the stone was smooth and flat. Being in bed for nearly two weeks made him restless. Even turning into a squirrel when Madam Pomfrey’s back was turned had eventually lost its appeal.

He had delved deeper into the dungeons than he usually would, not wanting any eager prefects to stumble across him. Not that his interest in skateboarding was something he needed to keep secret. He was known as a muggleborn, and muggles were considered strange and foreign, with bizarre habits that confused, scared, or entertained witches and wizards.

Professor Burbage did her best, Harry knew, but not everyone took Muggle Studies. Her wearing muggle clothes had caused something of a stir. Muggleborns didn't notice it at all, but to people who had grown up around adult witches and wizards who exclusively wore robes, it stood out. There was a dissonance, something so blatantly muggle as jeans and Doc Martens in a magical place. Like Harry's skateboard. The only sign of magic was the snake charmed to move on the deck.

The dungeons were cold and damp, lit by sputtering torches, when lit at all. The stones were ancient and worn, part of the foundation of Hogwarts. Sometimes Harry heard the Bloody Baron rattling around, but he tended to lurk around the common room during the start of the year, to assist the prefects in getting the first-years settled in. To get them accustomed to such an alarming ghost.

Harry took off down the corridor, Lady Madeleine running at his side, warming up before he tried anything more complicated than an ollie. He didn't have all night to practice, but all of his homework was done, he wasn't scheduled for rounds, his first-years were now second-years and didn't need as much supervision, and he had survived a skrewt attack. He had time to blow off some steam.

He slowed down to work on some more challenging tricks. Harry had been tinkering with the idea of coming up with his own, and was leaning towards freestyle. He tried an end over, Lady Madeleine hopping between his legs to spin around with him. She leapt away as he did a heelside rail, standing on the edge of his skateboard. If he conjured a ledge, he could work up to a primo slide—

“Imperio.”

Euphoria washed over Harry, wrapping around his mind like a warm blanket. Every thought was sea foam, gently blown away. The concentration on his face slackened to pure, uncomplicated bliss.

Perform a pop shove it, a resonant voice insisted.

From a railstand?

“That doesn't even make sense,” Harry said, moving one foot to the tail. He kicked back, scooping the board up so it rotated twice, landing solidly on top. Harry looked down at his skateboard, amazed he had landed the railflip. “Holy shit. First try.”

Lady Madeleine ran back to him, standing up on her hind legs and pawing the air.

“What'd you do that for?” Harry asked, turning to face his dad. His dad, who had only tried to use the fucking *Imperius curse* on him, walked out of the shadows he'd been lurking in.

“I have constructed a lab in a chamber nearby,” his dad said. “Skrewt experimentation.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. “Lady Madeleine—”

“Is barely a year old,” his dad said. “You cannot rely entirely on her senses.”

“Maybe not yet,” Harry admitted. “That doesn’t explain why you’re using Unforgivable curses on students.”

His dad crossed his arms, smiling slightly. “I suspected you would resist the spell.”

“Were you testing me?” Harry asked, getting off his skateboard so Lady Madeleine could ride it around. “Why?”

“Lupin will be casting it on the fourth-years.”

Harry stared blankly at his dad. His dad stared back.

“Can he even cast it?” Harry asked. “I can’t believe you were able to on me. Should I be hurt?”

“Occlumency,” his dad said. “And yes, Lupin will be capable. He might not wish to control the students, but he does wish for them to learn how to repel the Imperius. Even a weak will can have an effect.”

Harry crossed his arms too, distantly aware he was mirroring his dad. “Why only the fourth-years?”

“You’ll have to ask the headmaster that.”

Harry laughed.

Stumped

Chapter Summary

October 1994

Conversation swelled in the Great Hall as the heads of house descended from their table. Harry had a single fried egg on his plate. He did not like fried eggs.

The white was fine, it was fully cooked. It was the yolk that was the problem. When he was younger, in the months following his grandmother's death, he had worked up the energy to make himself a fried egg. The egg he used had gone bad, which he had discovered the moment he cracked it into the pan. The yolk had turned a vile greyish green, seeping out into the cloudy white. In the years since, he had smelled far worse things, but that rotten egg smell had stuck with him. He didn't trust a runny yolk. He had thought, perhaps, he could overcome this aversion. It was not the morning for it.

He pushed the egg towards Cassius, who raised an eyebrow but accepted his ovoid offering. The thought of someone, even someone as kind as Remus Lupin, casting another Unforgivable on his brother disgusted him. He knew what the Imperius curse felt like now, thanks to his dad, knew how easy it was for the weak willed to give in to its seduction. It reminded Harry of something Percy had said. How he had drugged himself with love potions, to feel how he thought he was supposed to feel. How he missed it sometimes. The euphoria, the simplicity. It was addictive.

Harry avoided looking at the head table, at the headmaster. It wasn't hard to guess why he wanted the fourth-years tested. The Boy Who Lived was a fourth-year. What, exactly, did the headmaster expect Monty to do?

His dad approached him and his friends, the sixth-years, carrying several slips of paper.

"For those who wish to enter the Triwizard Tournament, and who will still be underage by Halloween, these are permission forms for your guardians to sign," his dad said, drawing the attention of both upper and lower years.

Adrian's hand shot up.

His dad sighed, but handed Adrian a form. "Who else is eager to put their life at risk for a year's wages?"

Harry poured himself a cup of tea, watching as Terence, Adrian, Astrid, and Phoebe all took forms. Astrid's mouth thinned when she saw Harry did not receive one, nor had his dad

offered. He hadn't even brought enough forms for them all. His dad gave them all a disparaging look, then walked back to the head table.

"Bit harsh," Jasmine said quietly.

Harry shrugged.

"He only makes a grand a year?" Cassius asked.

"I'll get mum to sign for you," Astrid said in a low voice.

"We don't know how they're checking them," Terence pointed out. "You might both get in trouble.

"Who cares if we get in trouble?" Astrid asked. "Even if I did, he might not get in. And if he did, what would they do? They can't have him *not* compete."

Adrian snorted. "They should have let everyone put their names in. Imagine if it was a first-year. What a legend."

"Adrian," Jasmine said. "One of the tasks was to catch a *cockatrice*. The poor baby would get eaten!"

"Some of them would *do* the eating," Adrian said, looking down at the first-years. Malcolm Baddock froze with a spoon halfway to his mouth. "Maybe not that one."

Harry looked at what was happening at the other tables. Professor Lupin was walking around the hall, probably to let the fourth-years know what was going on that day. Most of the other sixth-years were taking permission forms, some already running for the Owlery to send them to their parents, including the Weasley twins.

He glanced at the Hufflepuff table. Cedric had already turned seventeen, and if he hadn't Amos Diggory would have slipped a disc in his haste to toss his golden boy into the ring. If they had restricted it to only people of age, most of the sixth-years would not have been eligible, only those lucky to be born in September or October. Despite having the same amount of schooling. Someone like Cedric didn't even need the money. Fred and George would make better use of it, though how the impartial judge would choose between the two of them was beyond Harry.

He was more interested in who or what the impartial judge was than the tournament itself, at least until it started.

Once breakfast was over, Harry was no longer thinking about the Triwizard Tournament, and was more concerned with how his brother's Defense lesson would go. What if he could be controlled by the Imperius curse? Then his classmates would know. Some of his classmates had Death Eaters in the family, people who had evaded Azkaban. People who would want the Boy Who Lived under Imperius.

Harry did not pay much attention to where he was going, and was surprised to find himself in the Arithmancy classroom. He joined Phoebe and Terence at their table, wishing he had

skipped class and staked out the Defense classroom. Kept an eye on Lupin.

“Are you okay?” Phoebe whispered.

“Yeah,” he said, getting out his books as Professor Vector walked into the room. She didn’t acknowledge them, immediately writing something on the chalkboard. Harry began copying it. *Vigesimal Numeral Systems*.

“It’s not fair,” Terence said quietly. “To have a requirement that you can’t fill.”

“I’m fine,” Harry muttered. He hadn’t planned on entering anyway. He knew it was a bad idea. He hadn’t talked to his dad about it, but his dad had known too. Even if Harry had wanted to, his dad would have advised against it.

“During your third year, we began with decimal numbers,” Professor Vector said, turning around to address them. “We have also covered quinary, octal, and duodecimal. Whence did quinary originate? Kirkby?”

“Five fingers, professor,” Noreen Kirkby replied.

“And duodecimal? Let’s see...Oakham?”

“The finger joints, ma’am.”

“Excellent,” Professor Vector said, writing that down on the board. “These ways of counting came most easily to us as we could see them by simply looking at our hands. And what about octal? Evans...”

Harry looked up.

“Actually, Mr. Higgs. Explain the origins of octal.”

Terence swallowed nervously.

“You hands, Higgs!” Professor Vector said. “Look at your hands!”

Terence slapped his hands on the table and stared at them.

“The spaces between,” Harry whispered.

“Oh, right! Counting between the fingers, professor,” Terence said happily.

Professor Vector shook her head. “Why do students think I cannot hear them whisper? Now, Mr. Evans, since you seem to be eager, what do you think a vigesimal system is?”

“It’s base-twenty, professor,” Harry said. “It comes from the Latin *vicesimus*, meaning *twentieth*. When you get to the twentieth number, you start over again. If we’re following the same pattern as the other bases we’ve discussed, I reckon base-twenty comes from counting fingers and toes.”

“Yes!” Professor Vector said excitedly, turning back to the board. “The hands with which we mold the earth, the feet with which we walk it!”

“I can’t believe the people in Divination think this is the hard option,” Phoebe said, writing a large twenty in her notes. “Vector’s as mad as Trelawney. The only difference is she’s well-read.”

“Seriously, I thought this was a class about maths,” Terence said.

“This *is* maths,” Harry said, slightly offended. “You’ve just got to broaden your definition of it.”

“Yeah, Terry, open your Inner Eye,” Phoebe said, plopping Felipe on the table. He made a little *squelch*, then weakly flapped the wings Phoebe had transfigured for him. They were shaped like those of a luna moth.

“Now, in Maya culture, they made no distinction between muggle and magical, as we do,” Professor Vector said. “Magic was viewed as a natural force, equal to all others.” She drew what looked like a shell on the board. “We shall start, as we must, from the beginning. The origin. The world turtle. The sea, the sky. Three stars in Orion’s Belt form the shell...”

Harry carefully drew a turtle shell in his notes.

“Now, these numerals are particularly useful in languages that count by scores. Welsh, French, Danish. A colleague of mine in Alaska stumbled across schoolchildren creating their own numerals to accommodate Inupiaq. Simply remarkable...”

“French?” Phoebe asked, writing it down in all capitals.

“A holdover from Gaulish,” Professor Vector said without looking. “Now, I want you all to write your names in vigesimal, using Maya numerals.”

Harry began making a key for the alphabet, skeptical of how well it would work. He hoped his brother’s lesson was less exciting.

When Monty woke up that morning, it was to a small thestral nibbling his hair. Tied to Benjy II was a note, with a single line.

You are the master of your own mind

Monty thought about it during breakfast. He had been distracted when Professor McGonagall came around with forms for the sixth-years, a reminder that the Triwizard Tournament was beginning in a few weeks. It had revived the excitement for the tournament.

Most people, including Ron, thought it would be cool to get in. Neville seemed relieved his grandmother couldn't bully him into it. Monty didn't see the appeal. He had enough galleons for a lifetime, he had fame he didn't even want. How could winning the Triwizard Tournament make him any more popular? And he doubted he would get chosen, especially if someone like Harry was entering. There were students who knew more magic, who were better at magic, if that was the metric by which the champions would be chosen.

He glanced at the Slytherin table, where Professor Snape was talking to the sixth-years. Harry had his head down, and didn't take one of the forms. Monty looked away, feeling abruptly angry. Harry should have been able to participate. He was the best student in his entire year, probably the entire school. He'd saved Sirius, though no one really knew that. And he'd killed that troll, and faced down a basilisk, and took him from the Dursleys the summer before third year, and...

Occlumency. That was what Harry meant.

Monty reached into his robes, where Hester was sleeping. She slept a lot, like most serpents did, which made caring for her much easier. Hester only ate once a week, though that depended on her size. She wasn't ready to be out of his pocket during meals, invisible or not. She still thought of owls as food. While technically true, it was important for her to learn certain things were off limits.

Professor Lupin walked past their table, which was unusual but not unheard of. Sometimes Hagrid stopped for a chat, though he hadn't been at meals since getting sacked. Remus looked pointedly at Monty's robes, and Monty withdrew his hand.

He was still allowed to keep Hester, but only because he was a parselmouth and had shown she listened to him. He had been worried Sirius would hate him for it, still trusting Harry's opinion about how people felt about parselmouths. Sirius and Remus had corroborated it, and both warned him not to tell anyone else, not even his closest friends. He would probably tell Luna. He knew she wouldn't be afraid. She would think it was a good thing, like Harry did. A rare and useful magic.

It was a relief that Sirius accepted it. That he didn't think Monty was too strange, too different from everyone else. So many people acted like it, because of his scar. He had never felt particularly special. Sometimes, when the whispers and stares got to be too much, Monty felt like that boa constrictor at the zoo. A specimen on display, people tapping on the glass to make him do something interesting, to provide them with entertainment.

He went back to eating his breakfast.

“Hello, Harry.”

“Hello, Luna,” Harry replied softly, shoulder deep in the stump hole of a snargaluff. He had distracted his stump with a leg of venison. Adrian and Astrid were beating theirs into submission. Screaming and crying could be heard from the Ravenclaw tables. Phoebe was thrown into the side of the greenhouse, while Cassius consulted a book on dendromancy. Jasmine and Terence huddled under a table, covered in cuts and bruises, while vines whipped around them. It was a fun class.

Luna was holding Lady Madeleine in her arms, the cat dangling like a rag doll.

“Don’t you have Potions right now?” he asked, finally grabbing one of the grapefruit-sized pods within the gnarled stump.

“Someone’s Confusing Concoction vaporized, so Professor Snape evacuated us,” Luna said.

Harry eased his arm out, careful not to disturb any of the bramble-covered vines. The snargaluff fruit pulsated in his hand. It was delicate work, as the vines came out of the same hole. The snargaluff couldn’t feed and attack at the same time, though, so Harry was reasonably confident he would not be injured. He couldn’t say the same for everyone else.

“We had a snargaluff at home,” Luna said, inching towards the stump. Harry kept an eye on her as he punctured the snargaluff pod, freeing the writhing green tubers inside. It was these that contained the precious juice, which could be pressed from the tubers.

“Here you are,” Luna said, dropping a pod on the ground. Lady Madeleine began batting it around.

“Lovegood!” Professor Sprout shouted, having revived Phoebe. “Third-years are not allowed in greenhouse five!”

“I’m going to check on Monty now,” Luna said, skipping towards the exit. Harry looked at his snargaluff stump, which had finally gone still. It looked like it was taking a nap. It wasn’t easy, sedating a plant, but Harry hadn’t read all those potions books for nothing.

He took the pod from Lady Madeleine before it could explode on the ground, and she ran off after Luna. Harry sighed, then began packing the wriggling tubers into a jar.

Monty waited apprehensively in the front row. The past few Defense classes had been spent discussing ghouls, which Remus knew Monty knew all about after he and Sirius had defeated the bathroom ghoul. But they had also been talking about the Imperius curse, and Remus had let them know the headmaster expected them to practice resisting it.

“Put your books away, for now,” Remus said. “Today’s lesson is going to be a little different.”

“How?” Malfoy loudly demanded. Monty clenched his jaw. He didn’t like how rude Malfoy was, especially to Remus.

It didn’t bother Remus, though. He smiled at Malfoy, then said, “One of you has been placed under the Imperius curse.”

There was a beat of silence, and then the shouting began.

“Professor, you said it was illegal!” Hermione protested

“Who is it?” Ron said, whipping his head around.

“When did you do it?” one of the Slytherins asked.

“He was walking around the Great Hall during breakfast,” another, Tracey Davis from the gobstones team, replied. “He must have done it then.”

“My father will hear about this,” Malfoy said, sneering at Remus.

“Your father can direct his concerns to Professor Dumbledore,” Remus said evenly. “As I said, today’s lesson is different. Your task is to determine who is Imperiused. You may begin.”

“How are we meant to do that?” Seamus asked angrily.

“I’m sure you’ll come up with something,” Remus said, sitting at his desk. He took out a stack of paper and a bottle of red ink.

“You’re *grading*?” Pansy Parkinson shrieked. “At a time like this?”

“I believe I told you to begin,” Remus said firmly, not looking up from the paper he was actually grading.

“It’s not me, I swear!” Neville cried, clutching his head.

“Look into my eyes,” Parvati yelled, shaking Lavender. “Look into my eyes, damnit!”

“It’s Goyle, it’s got to be Goyle!”

“It’s not Greg,” Vincent Crabbe bravely said, stepping in front of Dean. “He just looks like that.”

“Like an idiot?”

“Theo, put your wand down,” Blaise Zabini said. “You know me. We’ve been in the same dorm for years!”

“Prove it,” Theodore Nott said, sticking his wand in Zabini’s face. “Tell me something only you would know!”

Millicent Bulstrode cracked her knuckles.

Remus' words had wreaked havoc in the classroom. Hermione was a whirlwind of parchment and paper, pulling an unholy number of books out of her bag and roping Ron into searching through them for a solution.

Monty had no idea where to start. The door to the classroom opened, and of all people Luna stuck her head in. She looked around the room, smiled at Monty, then shut the door again.

"Isn't she supposed to be in Potions?" Monty said to himself. Neville was on the floor, rocking back and forth. Monty knelt down next to him. "Nev, what do you remember from breakfast? Did you lose any time?"

"I always lose things!" Neville wailed.

It was going to be a long class.

"I've got it!" Hermione shouted. "Has anyone felt really happy today?"

"What are you on about, Granger?" Malfoy said. "Do any of us look happy to you?"

"It's a simple question, Malfoy," Ron said acidly. "Unless you're the one who's been Imperiused..."

"How *dare* you!"

"Professor Lupin," Lavender cried. "Tell us who it is!"

Remus looked up from his grading. "No."

Bulstrode punched a wall.

"Millie, calm down!"

"She's hurting herself! That's exactly what someone under Imperius would do!"

"She punches walls for training, you idiot!"

"I can't remember if I've forgotten anything," Neville said, his eyes welling up. "Monty, what if it *is* me?"

"Has anyone felt any unnatural urges?" Seamus asked, squinting at his book.

"You are all being ridiculous," Hermione snapped. "We need to be methodical! Listen, it says here in *Life Under Imperius* that..."

Monty put his head in his hands. Was he the one who had been cursed? How would he know? He didn't think Remus would do that to him, but maybe he would since he knew Monty better than the other students.

Harry had given him advice. Occlumency. He had to clear his mind. It was something he already found challenging, and it was near impossible when his classmates were losing their

own minds.

“How would we even know?” he asked no one in particular. “Professor Lupin?”

“Work it out yourself, Monty,” Remus said, dipping his quill. “That’s one of the goals for our lesson. Problem solving.”

Monty sighed in irritation. “Can I have a book, Hermione?”

She responded by throwing a book at him.

“Thanks,” Monty said sarcastically. Maybe she had the right idea. It was obvious no one else had any clue how to go about it.

“Does anyone have eyes with a glazed appearance?” Ron shouted.

“I told you, Goyle!” Dean shouted back, pointing at Goyle, who had apparently given up and was eating a Jelly Slug.

“And I told you that’s what he always looks like,” Crabbe said, looking around for someone to back him up.

“Why should we trust you?” Seamus asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Why should we trust *you*?” Parkinson asked darkly. “I don’t trust anyone in this room! For crying out loud, Millicent, stop hitting the wall!”

By the end of class, Monty was completely defeated.

Remus clapped to get everyone’s attention. “Have you reached a decision?”

“No,” Monty said, drowned out by various accusations.

Remus smiled at them. “I have a confession to make. None of you were under Imperius.”

The shouting began anew.

“You what?” Ron said above the racket. “You mean we did all that for nothing?”

“Not nothing, no,” Remus said, levitating a stack of paper Monty hadn’t noticed before. “This is the exact situation the Ministry found itself in at the end of the war. It was a nightmare.”

The papers began floating out to them. It was a list of books.

“Now, I heard quite a few good ideas,” Remus continued. “Unusual behavior, glazed eyes, loss of time, confusion. Those could all be signs of the Imperius curse, but none are conclusive. Your homework assignment is to research methods of detection, and methods of resisting the Imperius curse. Next week, you will be placed under Imperius. This is

completely voluntary, and the headmaster will be supervising each session. Are there any questions?””

Growing Pains

Chapter Summary

October 1994

A lilac paper airplane landed on Percy's desk. He picked it up, unfolding it to reveal a message from Mr. Crouch.

My office, five minutes.

Percy jumped out of his chair, hastily straightening up his desk. As his responsibilities increased, so had his correspondences. His filing cabinet was the only thing keeping him sane. Even as he neatened his piles, a new missive appeared in his in-tray. Blood rushed to his face when he recognized the handwriting, but it had to wait for later. Mr. Crouch had summoned him.

Hurrying through the corridors, Percy mentally ran through his current projects. The mystery of floo powder had come to a dead end; Professor Sprout had never heard of the floo flower, and Percy had come to the conclusion it was not naturally occurring. Much like the blast-ended skrewts, it was likely the product of illegal experimentation. He also had no idea what the floo plant looked like, or where it grew. It was endlessly frustrating, but he was not willing to request a raid on Floo-Pow's headquarters to get answers. It could disrupt the production and distribution of floo powder. The Floo Network Authority had made their opinion very clear on that.

The matter of cauldron bottoms was far less polarizing, but there were special interests in the Wizengamot Percy had to navigate. Long-lasting cauldrons were not profitable. The scale of the project kept growing. Not only did he wish to establish regulations for both domestic and imported cauldrons, but to create liability for when those cauldrons melted. The latter was even less popular with those in the cauldron industry, who insisted cauldron failure was the fault of the brewer. For someone like Neville Longbottom, that was difficult to argue against.

Mr. Crouch's office door was open, so Percy knocked on the frame.

"Come in."

Percy steeled himself and walked into the office. "You wished to see me, sir?"

“Weasley, yes,” Mr. Crouch said, taking a paper from the top of a regimented stack. He had to have used magic to line everything up so exactly. Percy felt like an idiot for not thinking of that. “Bertha’s out today, so I’ll need you to write to Professor Dumbledore and Madame Maxime.”

“Regarding what, sir?”

“Karkaroff,” Mr. Crouch said, sneering slightly, “has finally informed us of the number of students he will be bringing to the tournament. He’s made it a round dozen. It is more than Madame Maxime had decided upon, and with the increased age range she may wish to bring additional students. Professor Dumbledore has been waiting on confirmation.”

“I’ll draft the letters immediately, Mr. Crouch,” Percy said. “I shall have them ready for your approval by lunch.”

Mr. Crouch looked at his watch. “In ten minutes?”

Percy felt his blush rise again. He needed to devote more time to occlumency practice. Perhaps Harry would have some suggestions.

After he excused himself, Percy quickly returned to his desk. As he sat down to begin composing the letters, Mr. Jordan stopped by.

“I’ll be out of the office during lunch,” Mr. Jordan said. “I’ve got to track down Bagman.”

“Yes, sir,” Percy said absently.

Mr. Jordan sighed. “Just call me Ken, Percy. Lee’s been friends with your brothers for years.”

“I’ll make a concerted effort to do so, Mr. Jordan.” Should he write the letter to Madame Maxime in French?

Mr. Jordan chuckled, then walked away. While Percy considered his limited knowledge of the French language—something else Harry would have been able to assist with—a new distraction arrived.

“Barty’s pushing you hard if you’re working through lunch,” his father said, smiling at him. He was dressed in trousers and a sweater Percy’s mother had knit, which would pass for muggle clothing in most places. “I came down to see if you wanted to eat together.” He lifted the brown bag he held for emphasis.

“Yes, of course,” Percy said, surprised his father had gone out of his way. He picked up his briefcase, hesitated, then took the letter from his in-tray. He wouldn’t risk it falling into someone else’s hands.

“Let’s go outside, shall we?” his father said, leading Percy to the lifts. “I could do with a bit of fresh air.”

Given the poor air quality alerts issued in muggle London over the summer—another thing learned from Harry—the *fresh air* was debatable. What his father wanted to do was muggle-

watch. Still, the more time Percy spent in the muggle world, the more confident he became in navigating it independently. It wasn't so different, buying something from a shop. There were still items on display, there was still someone taking the money. Percy wasn't quite sure what to do with the receipts he had been collecting. Perhaps he would make a scrapbook for his father.

He, of course, made sure to apply muggle-repelling charms before braving the streets of muggle London.

"You know what would be fun?" his father said as he began to walk into oncoming traffic. Percy grabbed him, pointing at the pedestrian traffic light. The glowing red man was clearly not walking. "We could eat at a muggle restaurant!"

"That would be an interesting experience," Percy said reluctantly. It was something he and Harry had done together. He didn't want others to intrude on that part of his life.

"We'd have to let your mother know beforehand," his father said, smiling as the green man appeared. Percy kept an eye out for mopeds, bicycles, strollers, loose dogs, or anything else that might run his father over. Arthur Weasley was too busy taking in muggle London, like a third-year in Honeydukes for the first time.

Discreetly checking his pocket watch, and making a note to find a more mundane watch for use in the muggle world, Percy eventually guided his father to a park. They sat on a bench, and Percy opened his briefcase to retrieve his lunch. It was nothing much, only a coronation chicken sandwich he had purchased from a cafe, and one of the apples he had grown fond of.

"That doesn't look like what your mother packed," his father said, leaning closer to examine the sandwich's cellophane packaging.

Percy berated himself for his carelessness. "I intend to work late into the evening, and am saving the lunch mother made for then."

His father nodded, readily accepting the explanation. He unpacked his own lunch, the inescapable corned beef sandwiches. Percy's mother was particularly adept at cooking corned beef. Percy wasn't entirely sure what corned beef was. A beef that had been corned. The absence of corn was mystifying. Perhaps Harry knew the origin of the term.

"There *is* something I wanted to ask you," his father said, giving Percy heart palpitations. "Fred and George sent me a letter."

Percy despaired at hearing this. Surely they would not break trust so easily? He would have to warn Harry. As a prefect and current student, he presently had more influence over the twins. Percy made a note to investigate their room for blackmail.

"They've both asked for my permission to enter the Triwizard Tournament," his father continued. Percy sighed in relief. "I haven't sent a reply yet. What do you think, Percy? Do they have a chance of getting in?"

"It would only be one of them," Percy said.

“I’m worried what would happen if they did manage it,” his father continued, not having heard him. “I don’t want them to put their lives at risk for a bit of gold.”

“It’s not exactly a *bit*,” Percy said, “and I doubt either would want to enter if they hadn’t bet all their money on quidditch.”

His father grimaced. “Right you are. Hypothetically, then, what do you think?”

“Do either Fred or George have a chance of being chosen as champion for Hogwarts?” Percy said. “No.”

His father chuckled, then patted Percy’s shoulder. “Didn’t have to think about it too hard, did you? Well, that’s a relief. I wouldn’t want to sign the boys up for something like that if it put their lives at risk. Your mother would kill me if she found out!”

Percy managed to get the letter to Madame Maxime drafted, and one to Professor Dumbledore, had both approved by Mr. Crouch, and had two owls en route, before he broke down and read Harry’s letter. During the summer, he could see Harry in the Portkey Office, have lunch together, send interdepartmental memos. Percy hadn’t known how much space Harry took up in his daily life until he was gone.

Dear Percy,

I’m not up to my usual formality. You can blame the skrewts for that. I know they’re in the Forbidden Forest somewhere, but haven’t had the time to locate them. Not that I would, it’s a patently bad idea even if I went in prepared. I think Professor Snape plans to vivisect a few once they’ve grown. They should be roughly the size of hippos by the end of the year.

I don’t think I’ll be entering the tournament. Professor Snape won’t give his approval since he thinks the entire thing is a bad idea. I do too, to be honest. It was discontinued for a reason. I know it’s Mr. Crouch’s project (and I have opinions on that too, if you’re amenable) and that you’re involved. I can appreciate the effort being put into it and not the end result.

Percy took his time reading the rest of Harry’s letter, savoring the words, the aesthetic of his handwriting. Harry’s script was astronomically superior to the chicken scratch Percy routinely had to decipher.

He treasured the glimpses into Harry’s daily life. There were tedious things, such as quidditch, but even Harry made it enjoyable with his witty asides. There were slightly alarming things, like the fourth-years being placed under Imperius. Professor Dumbledore had a lot of free reign at Hogwarts, but that was rather *too* free. Percy wrote down a few ideas of how to favorably represent it. Appeal to the public’s fear, perhaps.

There were notes on his siblings and cousin, none of whom owed him regularly. If Percy was the first to reach out, it was unlikely they would reply. They were teenagers away at a magical boarding school. They had better things to do with their time than send letters to an older brother they didn't like.

Percy had so much he wanted to tell Harry. So many happenings at the Ministry, so many idle thoughts. And if Harry wanted to enter the tournament, he should be able to. Who was Professor Snape to get in the way? Why would he not want Harry to participate? All of the professors were perfectly aware of the safeguards in place. Did Professor Snape not think Harry capable of it?

It was an outrageous thought.

Percy put down his pen before he sent a Howler to Professor Snape. He had done what he could to enable Harry to participate, if he chose to. Percy was straying close to bending, if not outright breaking, rules to get Harry into the tournament. And what would Professor Snape think if he got a letter from Percy about how amazing Harry was? Even if Percy never saw the man again, he would die of embarrassment. Professor Snape would have him committed to St. Mungo's.

No, if Harry wanted to submit his name for consideration, he would have to work it out on his own.

Percy picked up his pen again. He might not be able to take direct action, but he could certainly give Harry advice.

Madam Pomfrey held out a goblet nearly overflowing with a steaming, blood red potion. Harry took it from her, and gamely choked it down. It was something his dad had invented. Could he invent something to help Percy too?

"Run along, Mr. Evans," Madam Pomfrey said, seizing the empty goblet. "You don't want to be late for breakfast!"

Harry sighed, then hopped down from the hospital bed. He winced at the ache in his legs, shrugged it off, then headed for the Great Hall.

The ache didn't go away. Harry felt it all day, felt it get worse, until his legs throbbed with a deep cramping that unnerved him. Harry knew he should have gone straight to the hospital wing, but he was sick of being there. It was always something. Anxiety, skrewts, stupid leg cramping. He could still walk, could still get through the day. If it kept getting worse, then he'd go to Madam Pomfrey. Or his dad would find him hiding in bed, unable to move.

It wasn't a good day. People wouldn't shut up about the upcoming quidditch match between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. His friends' jokes grated on him. Peeves was extremely close to

being transfigured into a pile of shit, Harry didn't care how long it took to create the spell. Seeing Cedric Diggory in general annoyed him. He couldn't even have the decency to get an EE on his Potions O.W.L.

Harry had never engaged in the Slytherin tradition of sabotaging potions, but he was tempted. He tried not to think about Cedric at all, he wasn't worth it, but imagining a cauldron of Essence of Insanity exploding in Cedric's face helped get him through the day.

He sought refuge in the Restricted Section. No one else with a pass lingered there, preferring to quickly find their book and leave. Harry was alone, which was exactly what he wanted at the moment. He would finish his History of Magic essay, he would search for some books on the darkest of arts, he would go to dinner, he would play gobstones. Then he would be done.

As he began the second paragraph of his essay, Harry's skin prickled. He had become used to the sensation, since his brother now carried his invisibility cloak around with him at all times. It was a phenomenon Harry had looked into, but there wasn't much information on invisibility cloaks in general, nor any reports of demiguises having the same effect Harry experienced. He assumed it was simply another thing wrong with him.

"What are you doing back here?" he asked, turning to smile at his brother.

Monty pulled his invisibility cloak off, which was always interesting to see, and sat down across from Harry. "Studying the Imperius curse."

"Exciting stuff," Harry said. "Has Professor Lupin cast it on you yet?"

"No," Monty said. He looked around, then took out his wand and cast a silencing charm. Harry didn't object.

"Would occlumency really help?" Monty asked

"It helps with anything that affects the mind," Harry said. "Even potions. I can say from personal experience that it helps with resisting the Imperius."

Monty's eyes widened. "Someone's done it to you?"

Harry nodded. "I know them, so it wasn't serious."

"One of your friends?" Monty asked, even more alarmed.

Harry shrugged. "They were testing me. A bit like Professor Lupin's testing you, I suppose. At least you have time to prepare. I got it sprung on me out of the blue." He reached down to massage his leg, hoping the pain would stop soon.

"What was it like?" Monty asked.

Harry frowned thoughtfully. "The curse makes you feel good. Euphoric. So that's the first thing I noticed, after I heard it being cast. Given what I was doing at the time, the feeling made little sense. Then I heard the person's voice telling me to do something. I ignored it, and the curse was repelled."

“So that’s it?” Monty asked skeptically. “I just ignore it?”

“Easier said than done,” Harry said. “Out of your classmates, I say you, Granger, and possibly Bulstrode are the most likely to resist it.”

“You really think I can?” Monty asked.

“Obviously,” Harry said. “You’re my...protégé.”

“Right,” Monty said flatly. “Reckon I’ll have to see how I do.”

“Do you trust Professor Lupin?”

“Well, yeah,” Monty said. “I told him I was a parselmouth.”

Given his complete mastery over his mind, Harry merely raised an eyebrow. Remus Lupin had been indebted to the headmaster since he was eleven years old. If he thought it was in Monty’s best interest, or even if Dumbledore hinted at being interested, Lupin would squeal. If that was the case, Harry might as well get ahead of it and tell his dad.

It was another thing that connected Monty to the Dark Lord. The question was, had Monty been born a parselmouth, or had he been created? The two people who would know were dead.

“Was he surprised?” Harry asked.

Monty nodded. “Sirius was too. But it was either that or let Hester go.”

Harry sighed. It was his fault, then. Normally, seeing his brother, being able to talk to him, raised Harry’s spirits. Instead, he felt like a careless idiot. And his legs were still hurting.

“How is Hester doing?” he asked, not wanting to dwell on his mistakes. “Has she developed a taste for human flesh?”

The atmosphere was heavy in the Defense classroom. Monty sat in the front row, thinking over the advice Harry had given him. Harry made things sound easy, but Monty knew he practiced a lot.

The idea of someone else controlling him was so repugnant to Monty he could scarcely conceive of it. But people had fallen victim to the Imperius curse in droves, so few putting up a fight that there had been no warning. No one knew how many in the Ministry had been placed under its thrall. No one knew if they had found all of them.

“Today you will be taking your test on ghouls,” Remus said, startling Monty out of his thoughts. He was standing in front of the room, unusually somber. “While you are working

on that, I will be taking you individually into my office to test your resistance to the Imperius curse. As I mentioned last week, Professor Dumbledore—”

The door to the classroom opened, admitting the headmaster and Madam Pomfrey. Remus smiled faintly, then continued.

“The headmaster will be present, and Madam Pomfrey will be checking you for any lingering signs or other issues that might occur. If you don’t feel up to it, that’s perfectly fine. Just let me know, and I’ll move on to the next person.”

Monty looked around the room. He doubted anyone would turn Remus down. It seemed foolish not to have the experience. It was better to know what it was like.

They were subdued as Remus passed out the tests. Madam Pomfrey was whispering harshly to Professor Dumbledore, which was distracting, but Monty did his best to focus on the test. The questions weren’t that hard.

As he was writing about the benefits of having a house ghoul—they were great for clearing out doxy infestations, assuming the ghoul wasn’t murderous—Remus tapped his shoulder.

Monty silently stood and followed Remus into his office. He could feel the eyes on his back, could practically hear his classmates wondering how well the Boy Who Lived would do.

The door clicked shut behind him.

He looked around the office. Remus still had his grindylow tank in the corner, though it was currently empty. There were the familiar tins of tea, the chipped mugs. Professor Dumbledore was sitting next to Remus’ desk. Madam Pomfrey stood next to him, and had a look of strained patience.

“How have you been, Monty?” the headmaster asked.

“Fine,” Monty said. He had only spoken to the headmaster a few times, and always felt wrongfooted when he did. “How are you?”

“Quite alright, thank you,” the headmaster said, smiling kindly.

“Are you ready, Monty?” Remus asked, giving him a searching look.

Monty nodded, forcing himself to remain still. Remus watched him for another moment, frowned, and pointed his wand.

All of his thoughts, his worries, even the bruises from quidditch practice vanished. There was nothing, only an all encompassing sense of warmth, comfort, peace. Monty had never felt such bliss. Everything was wonderful. Everything was perfect.

Say your full name, a voice said, faint and echoing. *Say your full name*.

Monty started to open his mouth, then hesitated.

Say your full name.

His full name? He hadn't even known he had a full name until he got to Hogwarts.

Say your full name.

He thought Monty was his given name. He had never heard *Fleamont* until Professor McGonagall called it out at the Sorting Ceremony. Of course, Remus wouldn't know that.

Say your full name, now!

"No," Monty said, blinking. He felt vaguely nauseated, and swayed. Madam Pomfrey ran forward to catch him.

"Well done, Monty," Remus said, smiling at him. "Though you might want to play along, so the person who cursed you doesn't suspect the failure. It gives you the upperhand."

"That was awful," Monty said, accepting the vial Madam Pomfrey thrust at him. He avoided the headmaster's eyes, wary of how closely the old wizard was watching him. "How did everyone else do?"

"That is up to them to share," Remus said. "And for them to determine whether it's *wise* to share it."

Monty made an inarticulate noise, then drank the potion he had been given. It tasted like lavender and mint.

Helter-Skelter

Chapter Summary

October 1994

“What the hell is he doing now?” Astrid asked.

“Enough is enough,” Cassius said, pulling out parchment and quill. “I’m owling grandmother. He is out of control.”

The wind blew Harry's cloak open as he stood on the lawn, his friends strung out in a line. The sky was a solid grey, the lake dark and glassy beneath it. The sound of hammering echoed across the grounds. Harry narrowed his eyes, looking downhill.

A new structure was being raised next to the Forbidden Forest. It was the first time Harry had seen Hagrid in weeks, since the banishment of the skrewts. The large man was building an even larger paddock, his back turned to the castle. His boarhound, Fang, was languishing nearby.

“What the fuck is he putting in there?” Astrid demanded, taking a step forward.

“It can’t be for Care,” Phoebe said anxiously. Felipe tried to fly away, but she grabbed him. “Grubbly-Plank’s coming up from the lake.”

Harry glanced at the class approaching from the lake, the fourth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins. Vincent Crabbe saw him looking and saluted. Harry graciously nodded.

“There’s got to be some compound in gobstones that turns you batty,” Jasmine said. “You’re all deranged.”

“Never mind that,” Adrian said, cupping his hands around his mouth. “Oi, Hagrid! Hagrid!”

Terence lunged at Adrian, trying to shut him up.

Hagrid stopped hammering in a post, looked around, then went back to hammering.

“Forget it,” Harry said. “We’ll find out soon enough.” He stepped over Adrian and Terence and walked back to the castle.

“Do you think your grandmother could really do something about him?” Jasmine asked Cassius, glancing at the paddock. “He’s not a bad person, but he is rather careless.”

“He’s an arsepiece,” Astrid said firmly. “Remember when those manticores ate Kettleburn’s leg?”

“That wasn’t Hagrid’s fault,” Harry said. “Though maybe that’s where he got the idea for the skrewts.”

Their group was brought to a halt as the entrance hall was packed with milling students.

“Now what?” Astrid said, trying to see over the crowd. “Terence?”

Terence appeared behind them, spitting out grass. “Yeah?”

“What’s that sign say?”

Terence sighed, but said, “The other schools are arriving the day before Halloween.”

“Must be what the paddock’s for,” Harry said. He crossed his arms, listening in to the conversations around him.

Jasmine plucked his sleeve. “Your robes are getting a bit short, darling.”

“Are they?” Harry asked, taking out his wand. “Robus maximus.”

Jasmine tutted. “That isn’t a real spell. On Hogsmeade weekend we can...” she trailed off, watching as his sleeves slightly grew. She grabbed the fabric. “That’s not...did you see that?” she demanded, looking around. No one else was paying attention, and she gave Harry an exasperated look. “You’re unbelievable.”

Harry smiled slightly, crossing his arms again. In his periphery, he saw his brother with Hermione and Ron, the latter reading the sign for them. They were too far away to hear over the hubbub.

“*Ampliatto*,” Harry whispered. He had got the idea for the spell based on his dad’s *Muffliato* charm. *Muffliato* masked a conversation by making it sound buzzy and indistinct to listeners. Harry hoped the *Ampliatto* would act as an inverse, making the sound of other conversations fade to the background while amplifying the target’s. He needed a crowd to test it on, and it was the perfect opportunity.

“Think I’ll go tell Cedric,” a Hufflepuff fourth-year, Ernie Macmillan, said. He happened to be standing near Monty, but soon pushed through the crowd, presumably to find Cedric.

“Diggor’s entering the tournament?” Monty asked, sounding put off by the idea.

“That idiot?” Ron asked as Monty and his friends began wading towards the grand staircase.

“He’s not an idiot,” Hermione said.

“He is,” Monty said. “And a git.”

Harry covered his mouth, ignoring the strange look Jasmine gave him. She said something, but Harry couldn't hear her clearly. He shook his head, which only made her more concerned.

"Well, I've heard he's a really good student," Hermione said, "and he's a prefect!"

"Harry—Evans—is a better student," Monty said, "and he's also a prefect."

"Evans is a nosy know-it-all," Hermione said tartly.

Monty snorted.

"You only like Diggory because you think he's handsome," Ron said, glancing at Monty.

"Excuse me!" Hermione said. "I do *not*—"

Someone shook Harry's shoulder, and the charm broke. He rubbed his face, then turned to look at Astrid. She had a ferocious expression.

"I'll talk to Snape," she said. "I can be convincing."

"Are you going to beat him up?" Harry asked. "I really don't mind about the tournament, you know."

"It's a once in a lifetime opportunity," Cassius said. He had his book about dog howl divination with him, though there were no dogs in sight.

"So was knobbing Diggory," Adrian said, doing something weirdly suggestive with his eyebrows. "You should've seen him and Chang during the match."

"Starcrossed duffers," Phoebe said, holding Felipe out to Harry. Confused, Harry took the winged frog. Felipe croaked.

"I haven't got any Fudge Flies," Harry said to him. "And yeah, I skipped it for a reason. I'd just had breakfast."

"It was boring in the extreme," Jasmine said. "No school quidditch game should last that long."

"It was all very *will they, won't they*," Phoebe said, smiling inanely.

"Yeah, will they or won't they end the fucking game," Terence said. "Can we go to lunch now?"

The sign in the entrance hall had set the castle abuzz. The Triwizard Tournament was all anyone was talking about, though Harry noticed his friends avoided the subject around him. Not even classes were safe from all the questions, rumors, and speculations about the tournament.

In Transfiguration, Harry was facing down a growling raccoon dog while George Weasley, who had been sitting next to Harry since the start of term, idly poked his own untransfigured raccoon.

“Professor,” George said, drawing Professor McGonagall’s attention. “How are the champions selected?”

She pursed her lips. “Be quiet, Mr. Weasley, and get back to transfiguring your raccoon. I see Mr. Evans is once again the only one who has actually done his work. No, Miss Randle, they are not the same animal. They do not even live on the same continent!”

“I have no idea what a raccoon dog is,” George said, poking his raccoon with his wand. The raccoon hissed at him. “So, Evans, are you entering?”

“No,” Harry said, conjuring a leaf for the raccoon dog to hold. It began chewing on it. Harry turned to his book, wondering if he could transfigure it into a different species of raccoon dog.

“Don’t you want to impress a certain former Head Boy?” George said, nudging him.

Harry looked over at George. “I’ve got something more impressive for him.”

George grinned. “I hope your mate Pucey hasn’t rubbed off on you too much. For Percy’s sake.”

Harry sat back, idly tapping his wand. “It’s a shame we don’t study human transfiguration until seventh year. Wouldn’t hurt to get in some practice now.”

“Weasley!” Professor McGonagall snapped.

George winked at Harry, which was disturbing, then turned to look at his raccoon. Instead of a raccoon, a small weasel was staring at him. Harry smiled to himself.

“I said *raccoon dog*!” Professor McGonagall said, storming over. “What on earth are you doing?”

“That could be you,” Harry muttered. “If I transfigured all your limbs into weasels, you’d *really* be weasely.”

George’s smile grew strained. “You wouldn’t—”

“I wouldn’t *what*, Weasley?” Professor McGonagall demanded. “Take points?” She glared at the weasel, who was cowering away from Harry’s raccoon dog. “Is this meant to be a joke? This isn’t even a canid!”

As Professor McGonagall berated George, who was struggling to change the weasel back into a raccoon, Harry transfigured his raccoon dog into a wooden statue.

“If you’re bored, Mr. Evans,” Professor McGonagall said once she noticed, “you may begin your homework.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry said, pushing the statue aside and getting out parchment. Professor McGonagall shook her head, then stalked over to where Astrid was wrestling her own half-raccoon, half-raccoon dog. Harry had been a little surprised she continued in Transfiguration, but she was almost as dedicated to it as she was to quidditch.

“You really aren’t entering?” George asked, having finally untransfigured the weasel.

Harry sighed. He was sick of having this conversation. “Professor Snape won’t give me permission.”

“Why’s it up to him?” George asked.

Harry closed his eyes. “Because I don’t have a family, Weasley. Can we drop it now, or will I have to transfigure you into something with a more complex brain? A slug, perhaps.”

George slapped his back. “No need to get your knickers in a twist. I can take a hint.”

“Can you?” Harry asked doubtfully.

“Mr. Weasley, this is your final warning!”

George winced, then gave Harry a look of chagrin. “What’s the incantation again?”

The Slytherin common room was heaving. Since the announcement of Durmstrang and Beauxbatons’ imminent arrival, the house-elves had been working double time to get the castle in shape. That evening, they had all been sent straight to their common rooms after dinner, including the prefects, so that the house-elves could continue working. Harry had been forced to hold the gobstones team meeting in the common room, which was unfortunate as the Defense club was also meeting. It made for an amazing racket.

Harry watched as Mafalda was flung through the air, landing on a pile of pillows. Killian raced over to check on her, and Harry stepped in to observe Tracey and Vincent’s game.

“I think we need to switch partners,” he said. “You’re too comfortable with each other’s styles. Where’s Graham?”

“What?” Graham Montague shouted from across the room. He threw the quaffle he held to Cassius, who caught it in one hand. The other held a book. “I don’t play gobstones!”

“Pritchard,” Harry clarified. “The firstie Graham.”

“I’m here, captain,” Graham said, wobbling towards him. “Sorry, sir. Jelly-legs.”

“No need to be sorry, Pritchard,” Harry said. “This is perfect. If you can’t beat them, confuse them. Pritchard, you’re with Davis. Put him through his paces.”

Tracey saluted him and began collecting her gobstones. Vincent shook his head, splattering some nearby third-years with goo.

“Crabbe, you and Wilkes, five-second moves.”

“Felipe, no!”

Harry snatched the frog out of the air before he collided with a bottle-washer. “Watch it, Harper! Pritchard the elder, work on his situational awareness. Helter-skelter.”

Bridget gasped. “But, sir!”

Harry gave her a level look. She clenched her jaw and nodded, hopping up to get more gobstones.

Ethan hung his head.

“Chin up, Harper,” Harry said. “I’m pushing you because I know you can handle it.”

Ethan nodded, then sat up, his eyes burning with determination. Bridget returned with a bucket of gobstones, and within a minute was bombarding Ethan with them. With a surgeon’s precision, Ethan began shooting them out of the air with his own gobstones.

“Damnit, Harry,” Terence shouted, ducking under a stray gobstone. “What the hell kind of training are you doing?”

Astrid cackled from where she was observing Millicent repeatedly hit a mannequin with a beater’s bat. The quidditch pitch was also being spruced up, so team practices had been canceled. Not that it stopped Astrid. “Montague, quadruple, no, quintuple the quaffles!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Quaffles filled the air, and students ran to take cover.

“Release the snitches!”

“Urquhart, have you lost your mind?” Annabeth Sallow, a seventh-year prefect, bellowed from behind a tipped over sofa. “Some of us are trying to study for N.E.W.T.s!”

“Someone get Professor Snape!” a fourth-year girl, Daphne Greengrass, shouted, running through the flurry of quaffles, gobstones, snitches, and bludgers to get to her dormitory. Pansy Parkinson was close behind, using *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4* to whack the careening balls away.

Harry sighed as a bludger crashed into Derek and Vincent's game. A few of the gobstones were cracked, which he took out his wand to repair. "Avery, help me set up a perimeter."

Killian, who was dragging a dancing second-year out of the line of fire, gave him a desperate look.

"Malfoy, where do you think you're running off to?" Astrid shouted. "You're a seeker! I expect you to seek, soldier!"

"You're insane!" Draco yelled from the stairs leading to his dormitory. "Quidditch is played on brooms!"

"So you want to fly?" Astrid said in a low voice, taking out her wand. "Then I'll make you fly, Malfoy. *Levicorpus!*"

Malfoy shrieked as he was lifted into the air, dangling from one leg. "Get me down from here!"

"You can get down when you find the snitch!"

"I can't even move, you lunatic!"

Terence vaulted over several gobstones games, chasing after one of the snitches that had darted by.

"Look at Higgs!" Astrid said. "Perfect form!"

The door to the common room opened, and everyone froze as Professor Snape walked in.

Peregrine Derrick grabbed Millie's arm to stop her from clobbering the mannequin in the groin. She gave him a dirty look, then dropped the bat when she saw Professor Snape.

"This is exactly why I insisted club activities continue," he said, glaring at a bludger that nearly grazed him. "Carry on."

"Professor!" several people protested.

Harry's dad ignored them. "Prefects, I expect this to be cleaned up by midnight. You will be personally held responsible for any damage or injuries."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, echoed by his fellow prefects. His dad took one last look around, shook his head, and left.

Lady Madeleine darted through the door just before it slid shut. She had a letter with her, but dropped it when a snitch flew past, giving chase.

"Even a cat can catch a snitch," Astrid said bitterly. "What do you have to say for yourself, Malfoy?"

Greg poked his floating friend. "I think he passed out, Captain."

Astrid rolled her eyes, then dispelled the jinx. Draco dropped to the ground like a sack of bones. "Can Her Ladyship ride a broom?"

"She can, actually," Harry said, walking over to pick up the letter.

"Felipe, no! Not food!" Phoebe said, prying a gobstone out of her frog's mouth.

"Ribbit."

Harry suppressed a smile when he saw Percy's handwriting, then ducked under several quaffles. "I don't hear any gobstones."

"Yes, Captain!" his team said, and the gobstoning resumed.

He kicked an abandoned chair upright and sat down, ignoring the dark looks the seventh-year prefects Francis and Annabeth gave him. They could study for N.E.W.T.s in their dormitories. Or practice their shield charms. He took a breath, then opened Percy's letter.

Dear Harry,

I worry that Hermes will become exhausted from his frequent flights. When I suggested this to him, he became gravely offended and left a 'present' on my bed. Per your recommendation, I have acquired a copy of You and Your Owl, and have added owl maintenance to my schedule. Hermes, I hope, will appreciate the additional care.

Thank you for the updates on my younger relatives. Mother frequently laments the infrequent communications, impeded on her side by Errol's advanced age. This is not limited to those at Hogwarts, but includes William and Charles. That both have chosen such distant destinations to pursue their careers is blatantly intentional, even if Mother cannot see it. This leaves me as her only child within reach. My long hours at the Ministry are met with daily objections.

The Triwizard Tournament is an event which is, for someone of your abilities, more entertaining to participate in than watch. It is an opportunity to exercise your talents, to reify your various feats at Hogwarts, and a gateway into your career of choice. In other words, it is a way for you to show off. You rarely have the opportunity to do so at school, and are so far ahead of your peers that I doubt any could challenge you. It can be very isolating, being exceptional. Not that I consider myself such, but I can admit to you that I never fit in well with those in my year. I often found them childish and tedious. And then I met you.

I believe I know what Manfred and Georgius are up to. Father approached me regarding their entering the Triwizard Tournament. This, however, does not account for the frequency of the owls sent. If they were owling our parents, I would know. What of my suspicions, then? The twins placed a bet with Ludovic Bagman on the outcome of the Quidditch World Cup. There are rumors that Bagman has been slow in paying out the winnings. I believe many

were paid in leprechaun gold, including my brothers. Given the sensitive nature of this dispute, I have not yet intervened. I was hesitant to write it down at all, lest the Daily Prophet catches wind. That Bagman is pivotal in arranging the Triwizard Tournament further complicates matters.

You have said you are not entering. That is, of course, your prerogative. The question remains, do you wish to participate? If so, then Professor Snape should not be a barrier to that. Appeal to the headmaster if you must. The Tournament presents diverse and fascinating challenges, which one would not typically encounter, in a relatively controlled setting. I cannot fathom anyone being more worthy of it than you.

There is a Hogsmeade weekend next month. Would you be available to meet?

Sincerely yours,

Percy

Lady Madeleine jumped onto the arm of his chair and dropped a snitch into his lap. She started to purr.

“Thanks,” Harry said, folding the letter up. Percy knew him too well. He was right. Harry could see himself watching the tasks and thinking of how he would have approached them, how he would have done better. That was one reason he wasn’t looking forward to any of it, the expectation of boredom.

He wanted to flop over the chair, toss his head back in frustration, but he sat still, perfectly proper. The snitch’s crumpled wings flapped weakly.

“Malfoy, get your shit together! That cat is barely a year old and she’s already caught one snitch!”

Harry scratched Lady Madeleine’s ears, rolling his eyes at her smug look.

He suspected Percy had something to do with the changed age requirement. It was too big a coincidence, unless Durmstrang and Beauxbatons had strong sixth-years they wanted to put forward. He hadn’t asked, and he doubted Percy would admit to it. Percy loathed nepotism, even as he benefited from it. It was a large component of the rot within the Ministry. Harry was sure Percy could have guaranteed him a spot in the tournament, however the champions were chosen. What he had done instead was give Harry an opportunity, one which Harry would not take advantage of. It killed him that he couldn’t tell Percy why.

“Alright, Harry?” Terence asked as he jogged past.

“Yeah,” Harry said. He stood up, tossing the snitch for Lady Madeleine to chase. He would write to Percy later. For now, he had a gobstones team to captain.

The Ability to Cope with Danger

Chapter Summary

October 30th, 1994

The house-elves had outdone themselves. The castle was spotless, inside and out. The staircases had been swept and mopped, the banisters polished. The suits of armor had been thoroughly oiled, blades sharpened, and were standing at attention. The portraits and paintings had been wiped clean and carefully restored. The quidditch pitch had been raked, the lawn mowed. Rumor had it the Bloody Baron had spoken to Peeves, and the poltergeist was moping around the east towers. The Forbidden Forest was quiet, almost idyllic, and exuded a less ominous aura. Professor Trelawney had been spotted outside of the North Tower, smelling more of incense than sherry. The hippogriffs had been brushed down. The greenhouses sparkled like tumbled sea glass. The Giant Squid had been debarnacled and agreed to color herself in neutral blues and greens, rather than her more showy reds and purples.

Monty, having grown up in a dusty, spider-infested cupboard, had never noticed the little details. The dust in the corners, the smudged windows. They lived under candle and firelight, and such things were easily missed. And, free of his aunt, free from the endless chores she assigned, Monty had relaxed. He didn't have to worry about cooking and cleaning, broken glasses and torn clothes. He was allowed to be a child, to be a student. It was such a relief, to simply exist.

The sparkling clean castle, the evidence of the house-elves' labor, fueled Hermione's mission. To Monty, the stark contrast from how the castle was normally kept emphasized the better conditions the house-elves at Hogwarts lived under, compared to more hateful environs. He didn't know what had happened to Dobby, only that he had not seen the house-elf for nearly two years. Monty hoped he was still alive.

But these were passing thoughts that morning. The delegations from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons were arriving in mere hours, and the Triwizard Tournament was on everyone's mind.

He was sitting down at the Gryffindor table for breakfast. Luna had joined him, though Neville for some reason was sitting further away. Monty had the suspicion that Neville was not particularly fond of Hermione and Ron. Hermione could be very intense, and Ron could be very insensitive, and both were easily frustrated with Neville. Monty could not make all of his friends be friends with each other, he knew that, but it would have been nice. He didn't know if Harry was lucky, or if it was a concerted effort, that all of the sixth-year Slytherins generally got along. Monty barely knew Dean, Seamus, Lavender, and Parvati. He hadn't

even known Cormac McLaggen's name until he tried out for quidditch, and they had lived in the same house for three years.

Of all of Hogwarts, the Great Hall had undergone the most significant transformation. The enchanted ceiling had been cleaned of soot and smoke stains, and the morning sky was so bright and resplendent it dazzled Monty's eyes. It looked close enough to touch, or maybe the house-elves had sneakily cleaned his glasses too. Monty took them off, just to check.

"Are you tired of seeing?" Luna asked quietly.

"Not right now," Monty said, putting them back on.

Luna smiled at him. "I like your glasses."

"Thank you," Monty said, feeling warm. He prodded his scrambled eggs, suddenly self-conscious. "I like your plaits."

Luna shook her head, whipping her two plaits around. She had woven what looked like kelp into them.

"You are wearing the spew badge," Luna observed, pointing at his robes.

"I paid two sickles for it," Monty said. "And there are parts I agree with."

Luna nodded sagely, smiling in that vague and knowing way she had that utterly confused people.

Unfortunately, Hermione had overheard.

"It's S.P.E.W.," she said, spelling it out. "Do you see all of this?" Hermione gestured at the transformed hall around them. The clear sky, the freshly trimmed candles that hovered above them, the giant silk banners hanging on the walls for each house, the even larger Hogwarts coat-of-arms, the polished golden plates and goblets. Monty took a sip of his orange juice, relishing the tart flavor. He'd rarely had juice at the Dursleys. If Hermione didn't think he was grateful, she didn't know the first thing about him.

"Slave labor," Hermione said fiercely. "All of us are colluding in the oppression of one hundred magical creatures!"

Most people chose to ignore Hermione. Monty didn't know if it was because they didn't care, if they thought house-elves deserved a life of servitude for some heinous reason, or because it made them uncomfortable. George, who had been going over some letter with Fred again, pushed back.

"Have you ever been down to the kitchens?" he asked Hermione.

Monty's heart sank. Harry had shown him where the kitchens were, and while others knew of the location, it still felt special to Monty.

Hermione had never been in the kitchens, of course, so George went on.

“They’re happy there, Hermione. They enjoy cooking and cleaning and all that.”

“Because they’ve been brainwashed to think that!” Hermione exclaimed. “They’re uneducated, and—”

Luna started laughing. A full body laugh that shook the table. She clutched her stomach, tears streaming from her eyes. Monty was totally captivated.

“It’s not funny!” Hermione shouted. “What is wrong with you?”

Luna didn’t respond, approaching hysteria with her laughter.

“She’s not laughing at house-elves being magically indentured,” Monty explained. “She’s laughing at you calling them uneducated.”

Luna started coughing, and without thinking Monty reached out to pat her back.

“They *are* uneducated,” Hermione insisted. “That’s how it works, Monty. Slaveholders keep their slaves ignorant. It’s easier to control people that way!”

Monty shook his head. “House-elves aren’t stupid, they aren’t weak, and they aren’t uneducated. They aren’t helpless, Hermione. You haven’t even met a house-elf, how can you make a broad statement like that?”

“Have *you*?” Hermione demanded.

With a start, Monty realized he hadn’t told her about Dobby. He’d told that person who had rescued him from Privet Drive before second-year, the auror, and Mr. Weasley. A rogue house-elf was not something to spread around, since it would reflect badly on other house-elves, worse on those in abusive homes. One bad egg spoiled the bunch, as Mr. Weasley had put it.

“Yes, actually,” Monty finally said. “I know a few house-elves.”

Hermione looked appalled.

“And at least one of them would spit in your face for insinuating that he was some helpless, ignorant creature,” Monty added, thinking specifically of Kreacher. “Many house-elves are incredibly proud of their work, and their families.”

Luna finally caught her breath, briefly smiling up at Monty. She turned to Hermione, her expression becoming unusually serious.

“House-elves are powerful,” Luna stated. “Daddy says their magic is superior to ours. That’s true of many magical creatures.”

Hermione’s eyes lit up. “Which is why wizards oppress them! They control what they fear!”

Ron groaned, and opened his mouth to say something Monty worried was very stupid. Thankfully, the post owls arrived, and the conversation was over. People went back to

speculating about the tournament. What the impartial judge was, what the tasks would be, who would enter. Monty didn't care who entered, with one exception.

"Do you think he's going to enter the tournament?" Monty asked quietly, his words masked by the beating wings of owls.

Luna shook her head. "Harry doesn't like attention."

Level Nine, the Department of Mysteries, consisted of a single corridor leading to a single door. The walls, floor, ceiling, and door were all a featureless black. Percy silently waited with Mr. Crouch. Mr. Crouch checked his watch.

The door opened, black smoke pouring out.

"Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder," Percy guessed, based on the light vanishing and his sudden blindness. "Class VI import."

"Correct, Weasley," Mr. Crouch said, his voice sounding distant. "Is this really necessary, Broderick?"

The darkness gradually abated, revealing a skeletal, sallow man with a gloomy air. He mutely stared at them with sunken, mournful eyes. He wore plain black robes in the way one might wear a funeral shroud

Harry would fit right in.

"I'm afraid so," the man said in a dreary voice.

"This is Broderick Bode, one of the front-facing Unspeakables," Mr. Crouch said.

Mr. Bode turned his gaze on Percy. "You're one of Arthur's?"

"Yes, sir," Percy said.

The man sighed, then reached into the air and tapped his fingers against something invisible. It melted into view, an ancient wooden chest set with an absurd number of gemstones.

"Two hundred years, Barty, this casket has been sealed," Mr. Bode said. "This is not wise."

"It's tradition," Mr. Crouch said, stepping forward to take the jeweled casket. Mr. Bode sighed, but removed his hand.

"I don't find that compelling," Mr. Bode said.

“I shall personally ensure the Goblet is returned in the condition it was received,” Mr. Crouch said. He nodded to Mr. Bode, then turned to walk back to the lift. “Come along, Weasley.”

“Yes, sir,” Percy said, hurrying to keep pace. When he entered the lift, he pressed the button for Level Five. He looked up, and saw Mr. Bode staring unblinkingly at them.

“What is in the box, sir, if I may ask?”

“You may,” Mr. Crouch said. “It contains the Goblet of Fire.”

Percy eyed the casket warily. “That is not mentioned in any account of the tournament.”

“It wouldn’t be,” Mr. Crouch said. “Little is known about the Goblet. What we do know is that it acts as an arbiter of a binding vow, and punishes those who attempt to break it.”

Percy looked away. Perhaps Mr. Bode had been right. Such an artifact was an extreme way of choosing the champions.

They spent the remainder of their ride in silence.

“I will be leaving for Hogwarts shortly,” Mr. Crouch said once they had reached their department. “As Bertha has the day off, you will assume her responsibilities during my absence.”

Percy tried to contain his shock. “You can rely on me, Mr. Crouch.”

“I know, Weasley,” Mr. Crouch said, walking towards his office with the casket. “Otherwise I would not have chosen you. Send a memo to Ludo, let him know to meet me in the Atrium.”

“Yes, sir,” Percy said, hurrying to his desk to do just that. Acting secretary for the entire department. It was unbelievable. He needed a third party to confirm the past five minutes had actually happened.

At his desk, Percy found a letter from his brother. He read it quickly, pleased to learn the Horntail had finally laid and that all the dragons were broody. There was yet another offer to *talk*, which Percy dismissed. The only person he wanted to talk to at any length was Harry, and he had tentative plans to meet him at Hogsmeade. He would have to find a place students and staff did not frequent.

Percy quickly wrote a memo for Mr. Bagman, following in the paper airplane’s wake as he carried his things to Miss Jorkin’s desk. Department secretary for a day, perhaps two if Mr. Crouch’s return was delayed.

He couldn’t wait to tell Harry.

Harry pulled his mother's cloak around himself, looking up at the sky. He was out on the lawn with everyone else, standing in a line with the other sixth-years from all houses. Dusk had begun to fall, and a crisp wind blew across the grounds. His fellow students speculated about how Durmstrang and Beauxbatons would arrive. Harry took his cue from the professors, who, when they were not scolding students for slipping hats and unnecessary ornamentation, were looking above the Forbidden Forest.

As the stars came out, the grounds grew silent. It was a beautiful night, the sky clear and endless above them. Pleiades, the Seven Sisters, was just rising above the treetops, when the headmaster called out from the back row, announcing the approach of Beauxbatons.

"See anything?" Astrid asked at his side.

"Pleiades," Harry said, watching as the speck that occluded the cluster of stars grew larger.

"What is it?" Terence asked.

Cassius sighed. Harry knew this was because astromancy did not lend itself to immediate answers.

"They're blocking Merope," Cassius said. "The youngest of the sisters. She who became mortal for love. The lost sister."

"*Pleiades* also has an origin in *plein*, to sail," Harry suggested. "The Sisters were used in muggle navigation. Maybe Durmstrang is sailing here."

"Not now," Jasmine admonished. "Look! They've brought abraxan!"

"Those are some fucking massive horses," Adrian said, nodding in approval.

"Wait until you see the headmistress," Harry said, smiling at Mafalda in the front row. She was losing her mind over the big, golden, flying horses.

It was a team of a dozen abraxan, an obscene expense, drawing an immense, pale blue carriage. The abraxan slammed into the ground one by one, leaving hoof-shaped craters in the freshly mown grass. They tossed their giant heads, their fiery red eyes rolling, their great chests heaving, thick lather glistening on their coats. The carriage slammed down behind them, bouncing to halt.

"That explains the paddock," Terence said as Hagrid approached the abraxan.

The carriage door opened, and a small boy in blue robes hopped down. A set of golden steps unfolded, and a large heeled boot appeared.

From the carriage emerged a giant woman. Photographs of Madame Olympe Maxime did the woman little justice. She was identical in size to Hagrid, though she possessed considerable grace as she descended the golden steps. She was draped in gleaming black satin, and opals on her fingers and neck drew attention to her olive skin and dark eyes.

Astrid began drooling at his side.

“She’s old enough to be your grandmother,” Harry whispered, joining the applause as Madame Maxime approached. “And she doesn’t play quidditch.”

“And she’s got competition,” Adrian said, nudging Harry and pointing at Hagrid. It seemed the magnificent abraxan had been eclipsed by the majestic presence of Madame Maxime.

“So it *is* a breeding pen,” Phoebe said.

“A clash of titans,” Adrian said, grinning.

“Stop,” Jasmine hissed. “I need that image obliterated. Now.”

“No, we all must live with it,” Cassius said, looking at the sky again.

“Oh, she brought students with her,” Harry said, watching a dozen Beauxbatons students, wearing silk in late October for whatever reason, join Madame Maxime. They shivered in her shadow.

After Madame Maxime gave some handling instructions for her abraxan, she and her students entered the castle. Hagrid began unhitching the abraxan at top speed, leading the winged horses to the paddock he had built. Harry could just make out a stack of casks, no doubt filled with single malt whiskey.

Harry’s eyes strayed, somewhat optimistically, to the lake. The grounds became silent again, most students looking to the skies and speculating about what steeds Durmstrang would bring. Given the absence of a second paddock, Harry doubted there were any.

On the lake, bubbles began to form.

“I should have taken Arithmancy too,” Cassius said as a black mast emerged from the water. The ship rose on a whirlpool, like a wreck resurfacing after centuries under the waves. This vessel lacked the grandeur of the Beauxbatons carriage. It was menacing, which was on the nose for a school known for its emphasis on dark arts.

“Da thought about sending me to Durmstrang,” Adrian said. “If that’s how they get to school, I’d rather take the train.”

“It’s very...wet,” Phoebe said.

The Durmstrang ship silently beached itself, then spat out a plank for its students to walk down. Unlike the Beauxbatons students, the Durmstrang coterie were dressed for the weather.

“Wet fur,” Jasmine said, conjuring a handkerchief to cover her nose. “I can smell it from here.”

An older man dressed in fine robes of silver fur led the Durmstrang students up the lawn. As he neared, Harry could see the emptiness in his cold, blue eyes. It was a stark contrast to Dumbledore, who greeted his fellow headmaster warmly.

“So that’s Igor Karkaroff,” Harry said quietly, watching the headmaster of Durmstrang approach. He realized his mistake too late, as Jasmine gasped and dropped her handkerchief. She grabbed his arm in a painful grip, her eyes not leaving the man who had condemned her father to Azkaban.

“I’m sorry,” Harry began, but Jasmine shook her head, her entire body tense.

“What’s wrong?” Adrian asked, looking at her with concern.

Cassius sighed. “We’ll tell you later.”

Jasmine’s distress was temporarily forgotten when Astrid grabbed his other arm. Karkaroff had just introduced Viktor Krum.

“Krum! *Krum!*” Ron repeated, violently shaking Monty.

“Yeah, I can see,” Monty said, watching the internationally renowned seeker enter the castle. Maybe he would get a break from being a celebrity with Krum around.

Nearly the entire crowd was talking about Viktor Krum. People searched their robes for quills, lipstick, anything they could get a signature with. It reminded Monty of the fanaticism surrounding Lockhart, and Lockhart’s regular attempts to get Monty to leverage his own celebrity status. He found it distasteful.

“Do you got a quill on you?” Ron asked him.

“No,” Monty said bluntly. Had Ron found another famous person to latch on to? If he wasn’t the Boy Who Lived, would they have ever been friends?

Back in the Great Hall, Ron desperately tried to lure Krum to their table by clearing a space. Monty saw the Beauxbatons students had sat at the Ravenclaw table. Luna was surrounded by them, and immediately tried to talk to one pretty blonde girl about nargles. The girl stood up and moved away, settling further down the table. Luna didn’t react to this obvious snub, instead pulling out the journal she had hidden in her robes to draw in.

Monty watched her for a moment, and then Ron started whining.

“What is it now?” Monty asked, looking around the Great Hall. He instantly spotted Ron’s gripe: the Durmstrang students had sat at the Slytherin table. And Viktor Krum, of all people, was talking to Harry.

Jasmine and Astrid pressed against Harry from either side, for vastly different reasons. Adrian kept glancing at Jasmine, until Phoebe kicked him.

Harry looked around the Great Hall, saw Luna standing out bright as a moon among the pretentious Beauxbatons students. The Durmstrang students lingering near the doors. He made the grave mistake of making eye contact with Viktor Krum. There was a hint of recognition in Krum's eyes, and he began walking towards their table.

"Harry, why is Viktor Krum gazing longingly at you?" Astrid hissed.

Harry smiled slightly, which only seemed to embolden Krum as he approached.

"Make room," Terence whispered, scooting down the table. Space was made between the sixth- and seventh-years, and somehow Harry was sitting across from Viktor Krum.

"I have seen you before," Krum said slowly.

"*Dobre doshŭl*," Harry said, recalling the words Mr. Crouch had said to the Bulgarian Minister for Magic.

Krum visibly relaxed. "Ah, yes, the World Cup. You were with your Ministry?"

"I was a portkey operator," Harry said.

"*Znaete li bŭlgarski*?" he asked.

"*Ami, govorya malko*," Harry said, reaching for what little Bulgarian he knew. "*On govorit po-russki*," he added, nodding at Adrian, who blanched. It seemed he was affected by Krum's presence.

"*Zdorovo*," Adrian said with a strained grin. Krum nodded to him.

"I should have sorted Ravenclaw," Jasmine said weakly, sharing a small smile with Harry.

"*Ya skuns!*" Phoebe said happily.

Harry winced as Lady Madeleine sunk her claws into his leg. He ducked under the table to pick her up, then put her in Jasmine's lap.

"I'm Harry Evans," he said, holding his hand out to Krum. Krum was rather frail-looking, but had a firm grip. Years of catching snitches, Harry imagined. "I'm a prefect, so if you need help getting around, just let me or Jasmine know."

"It is nice to meet you," Krum said. "Again. Let us introduce each other. This is Poliakoff..."

As they made introductions, the Durmstrang students removed their heavy furs, looking around the Great Hall curiously. They seemed impressed by the enchanted ceiling, the well-behaved ghosts, even the golden plates and goblets. Given the state of their ship, Harry could imagine what Durmstrang itself looked like. He doubted they had a hundred house-elves at their disposal.

Jasmine stiffened again when the adults walked into the Great Hall. Her eyes were trained on Karkaroff like a hawk, watching him throughout Dumbledore's little speech, when food appeared, when Karkaroff immediately engaged Dumbledore in conversation. Harry glanced at his dad, who had sat as far away from Karkaroff as he could.

They just had to get through dinner.

Karkaroff would be at the school all year, a constant reminder. Harry knew that Jasmine largely blamed her father for his own actions. If he had never joined the Dark Lord, if he had never betrayed the Ministry—

“Meow!”

Harry looked at the Gryffindor table, where a Beauxbatons student was retrieving a dish of bouillabaisse. He gave Lady Madeleine a pat for her amazing sense of smell.

“*Tarator*,” Krum said appreciatively, taking a bowl of cold cucumber soup, fragrant with dill. Their table was laden with a more diverse spread of food. Harry reached for a tray of what he thought were pierogies, dumplings filled with minced meat and drizzled with sour cream. Jasmine despondently picked at a kebab. Astrid cut into a baked dish, golden pastry covering chunks of beef and potatoes, topped with savory yogurt.

“*Musaka*,” Krum helpfully provided. “It is quite good.”

Astrid nodded and took a bite. “Fit rare.”

“She likes it,” Harry translated, privately glad his friends weren't acting weird in front of Krum. Not too weird. He couldn't say the same for most of the Great Hall, who were torn between staring at the Beauxbatons girl who looked like she had veela heritage, and the famous quidditch player. Draco Malfoy kept shooting them nasty looks; clearly he had wanted to sit near Krum.

Krum, as it turned out, was reserved. He ignored the people staring and whispering about him, quietly enjoying his meal. The other Durmstrang students were more talkative, asking about Hogwarts, the grounds, their classes.

As the meal progressed, two more additions appeared at the head table. Ludo Bagman, who had chosen to sit next to Karkaroff, and Barty Crouch, who had chosen not to. Harry looked at Crouch for a moment, wondering who was more detestable between him and Karkaroff.

Crouch had been the one to send Sirius Black to Azkaban. No trial, not so much as checking his wand for any spells cast. With that decision, Crouch had consigned Monty to the Dursleys.

Harry knew it was more complicated than that, that living with their aunt afforded Monty some protection against the Dark Lord. Harry didn't completely buy it, given the Dark Lark had disappeared for a decade, and when he did appear it was not to go after Monty, but an artifact that promised immortality.

There were other protective magics, ones that didn't rely on a blood relation. It made Harry wonder if Dumbledore had chosen to abandon Monty with the Dursleys because he wanted to cast the Bond of Blood, or if he had decided to leave Monty with his muggle relatives first, and then chosen what spell to use.

Either way, Monty could have had Sirius in his life. He hadn't, and it was Crouch's fault.

Did Percy know how much damage Crouch had done in his career?

A small distraction came in the form of pudding, and Harry was caught in the crossfire of everyone explaining what things were. Baklava, layers of finely ground pistachios between paper-thin phyllo dough, soaked in honey and rosewater. Dense almond biscuits encrusted with coarse sugar, served with rich and bitter coffee. Towering Black Forest cake, frosted with thick whipped cream, cherries spilling out of it like rubies.

It was overwhelming, even by Hogwarts standards, and the lower years were stuffing themselves with sugar. Mafalda had seized an entire *prinsesstårta*, a princess cake, for herself.

Eventually, the plates were cleared, the younger kids began to fall asleep at the tables, and Dumbledore stood to address them. The Triwizard Tournament was about to begin

Harry listened as Dumbledore introduced Bagman and Crouch, stressing how much work they had put into organizing the tournament. Harry doubted Bagman had much to do with it. The tournament would be judged by the headmasters and headmistress, as well as Bagman and Crouch.

Flick walked out of a dark corner, carrying a large wooden chest covered in sparkling jewels. He sat it heavily on the table in front of the headmaster, then backed away.

"There will be three tasks," Dumbledore said, "tasks which will test the champions in many different ways. Their magical prowess, their daring, their powers of deduction, and, of course, their ability to cope with danger."

The Great Hall fell completely silent, all focused on Dumbledore's words.

"The champions," Dumbledore said into this silence, "will be chosen by an impartial selector."

Dumbledore took out his wand, and Harry's eyes were drawn inexorably to it. He barely noticed the headmaster tapping the chest, or the ancient wooden goblet filled with blue flames. Dumbledore put the wand away, and Harry shook his head, instead looking at the goblet that had been placed on top of the chest. The Goblet of Fire.

Monty rolled his eyes as Ron asked about Viktor Krum yet again. It reminded him of his first time on the Hogwarts Express. Everyone trying to get a look at Monty Potter. Fred and George pointing at his scar. Ginny begging Mrs. Weasley to get on the train to gawk at him. Ron asking to see his scar. Even Draco Malfoy had been searching the train for him. The only person who had treated him normally was Harry.

As they followed the crowd out of the Great Hall, they passed the Slytherin table. Karkaroff was rounding up his students, though he only had eyes for the most famous of them. Harry had an expression so cold it took Monty aback. He looked at Karkaroff again. Who was he? Harry's friend Rookwood looked like she was going to faint.

Harry whispered something to her and she nodded stiffly. Karkaroff led his students out of the Great Hall, and Harry's friends followed close behind, chatting amiably with the Durmstrang students. Draco Malfoy was pushing through the crowd, trying to get closer. They blocked Monty and his friends from leaving.

"Still trying to smarm up to him," Ron muttered darkly.

Monty turned to look at him. "What?"

"Krum won't fall for it," Ron said firmly. "I bet he's used to people fawning over him."

"You think?" Monty asked. "Reckon I wouldn't know what that's like."

He didn't hear Ron's response, finally making it through the press of students and to the grand staircase. Between Ron drooling over the Beauxbatons girl and all the weird comments he made about offering his bed to Krum, Monty was exhausted. Seeing Ron act like that towards other people, comparing it to how Ron treated him... Monty didn't know what to think.

He hoped Sirius was still awake.

Harry was in bed, staring through the window that showed the abyssal depths of the Black Lake. He had gone to bed later than intended, given the struggle to get the first- and second-years to stop running around the common room.

"It's just an Age Line," Terence said. "It can't be that hard to work around."

"It won't only be that," Cassius said. "That's all Dumbledore chose to tell us, but there must be other protections."

"I could make that shot from ten feet," Adrian said. "Keep throwing papers until one gets into the Goblet."

"Are you trying to outsmart the headmaster?" Harry asked. "Don't bother, it's a lost cause."

“It’s not the Age Line, or any other barriers, that he would have to circumvent,” Cassius said.
“The Goblet of Fire. That is the challenge.”

“Never heard of it,” Terence said.

Harry sighed. *Their ability to cope with danger*. If that was one of the Goblet’s requirements, he would never be selected.

“What do you think, Harry?” Adrian asked.

“I think I’m going to bed,” Harry said, shutting his curtains.

No Control

Chapter Summary

Halloween, 1994

The thirteenth anniversary of Lily Evans' death

“Get it off me! Get it off! Harry, you cu—”

Harry covered his head with a pillow, but when Adrian continued screaming he decided he might as well get up.

“Questions that besiege us in life are testament of our helplessness...”

Harry turned off the wireless, which he had fallen asleep listening to. He tucked it under a pillow, then pushed his curtains aside to find Adrian rolling on the floor, fighting off a huge, stuffed, swooping evil that shrieked every time Adrian punched it.

“Can you two shut up?” Terence shouted from his bed.

“Sorry,” Harry said, reaching for his wand. He tapped the large plush toy, and it released Adrian.

“I never thought you would use that against me,” Adrian said, picking himself off the floor. “Betrayal, Evans!”

“Don’t touch my curtains,” Harry said, stuffing the oversized toy back into his trunk, where it would lie in wait for any future attempts to wake him up. “Next time, it’s going to spray gobstones fluid.”

“Lovely,” Terence said, emerging from his own bed. “Where’s Cas?”

“He’s gone to put his name in,” Adrian said. “That’s where I’m headed.”

“In your pants?” Harry asked, popping out his retainers.

Adrian grinned lasciviously, flexing for his audience. “Why not?”

Harry made a face, then searched for a robe to wear. His choices were black, black, or black.

“You’re not his type, Adrian,” Terence said, walking to the bathroom.

Adrian drooped. “Yeah, his type’s more tall, ginger, and swotty.”

“Piss off,” Harry said without any heat.

“That’s what happens when you duel in public,” Terence called through the door.

Adrian started laughing. Harry sighed, then opened his trunk. The swooping evil swooped out once more, shutting Adrian up.

“I have never willingly woken up this early in my entire life,” Phoebe declared, Felipe croaking in sleepy agreement.

Harry had joined his friends in the entrance hall to watch people put their names in the Goblet of Fire before breakfast. A golden line had been drawn around the Goblet, in front of which Filch waited to check permission forms. Mrs. Norris was pacing back and forth, glaring at students trying to bypass him.

Lady Madeleine walked right up to the line and lifted her paw. Harry ran forward and picked her up before she could touch it. Filch sneered at him.

“Sorry,” Harry said, carrying his cat away. “What were you thinking? Who knows what that could do to a cat.”

He and Lady Madeleine both looked back to see Mrs. Norris walking across the Age Line, her bushy tail twitching in a taunt. Lady Madeleine’s chest rumbled in a low growl. Harry hugged her consolingly, walking back to his friends.

“Who’s put their name in so far?” Terence asked.

“I put mine in first thing,” Cassius responded, paging through a book on pyromancy. The Head Girl, Sarah Fawcett from Ravenclaw, walked right up to the Goblet of Fire. When she dropped a slip of parchment in, the fire turned red, sparking a few times before settling down. Cassius flipped to the back of his book.

“All the Durmstrang students did,” Jasmine said dully. Harry frowned when he saw that, instead of tatting or embroidery, Jasmine had begun to knit something. At least, he assumed it was knitting, though there were five needles that were pointed on both ends. And she hadn’t charmed them, as other magical knitters did. She was aggressively knitting row after row, using a sinister black yarn.

Harry wasn’t the only one not looking forward to the day. Jasmine could have got permission from her mother, but she didn’t want her name in the *Daily Prophet*. Generally, only people in Slytherin knew who Augustus Rookwood was, so her name rarely caused a stir. But among those old enough to remember, they knew his being outed as a Death Eater had caused a storm. An Unspeakable, one of most esteemed and privileged roles in the Ministry, had

betrayed them. He was the mastermind of a network of informants, willing and unwilling, within the Ministry. One of the Dark Lord's highest ranking servants.

Jasmine would not expose herself like that.

Harry had similar reasons, and wished he could share them with her. To let her know she wasn't alone.

He wished he could tell his friends why he hated Halloween so much.

Laughter cut through his thoughts, and he looked towards the grand staircase. Monty was walking down the marble steps with Neville, Ron and Hermione close behind. Fred, George, and Lee hurried past them. Fred saw him watching and winked.

"What was that about?" Astrid asked. "Fraternalizing with the enemy?"

"There is nothing fraternal happening," Harry said flatly, watching the trio present their forms to a grudging Filch. While Filch was distracted, a fifth-year Hufflepuff snuck over the line. He paused, looking amazed he had got across. Before he could take a step further, the golden Age Line sizzled to life, flinging the boy away.

Adrian gave a low whistle when the boy landed in a painful heap. As he pushed himself up, a long, white beard sprang from his face.

"That's the second one," Jasmine said, shaking her head as Head Boy Stebbins, another Hufflepuff, helped the boy stand and marched him towards the hospital wing amid rowdy laughter.

"Ageing potions are out, then," Terence said, giving Harry a sidelong look.

"A cursory search in the library would have told him that," Harry said.

"When did you have time to go to the library?" Jasmine asked him. "Unless you've been roaming the castle at night."

"You insult me with such base accusations," Harry said, while Lady Madeleine lashed her tail. "Are we going to watch this all day?"

His friends all looked at each other, which put Harry on edge, then as one moved into the Great Hall. He set Lady Madeleine down and followed them.

The decorations in the Great Hall weren't much improved from the night before. The Hogwarts and house banners had been replaced by live bats and grinning pumpkins. Sitting through breakfast was a trial. Everyone was talking about who was entering, who wasn't entering, who had already entered. Harry was feeling squirrely, and briefly considered turning into a squirrel and fleeing into the Forbidden Forest. He could fight some skrewts to take the edge off.

Seeing Cedric and his friends jostling each other at the Hufflepuff table was giving him a migraine.

“What are you doing today?” Phoebe asked him, innocently batting her eyes.

“Library,” Harry said, dumping sugar into his coffee. It was so sweet it made his teeth hurt.

“That’s perfect,” she said brightly. “I mean, ugh, boring. Library!”

Harry sighed. “Whatever you lot are planning, don’t.”

“Planning?” Adrian asked, looking around. “There’s a plan?”

“No,” Astrid said emphatically.

There was a loud cheer, and the Gryffindor quidditch captain, Angelina Johnson, walked into Great Hall, smiling shyly.

“I think she’s more your size,” Harry said, smirking at Astrid. Astrid scowled back.

“She’s a mediocre chaser,” Astrid said. “Good enough for a school team, but she’ll never play professionally.”

“So that’s the standard,” Harry said idly, adding more coffee to his sugar. “What are *you* doing today?”

“Quidditch practice,” his friends said simultaneously, including Phoebe and Jasmine, neither of whom played quidditch.

“Right,” Harry said. He finished his coffee and stood. “I’ll see you later. Much, much later.”

“Let’s walk you to the library,” Phoebe said hastily, jumping up to take his arm. “Make sure you get there in one piece.”

“Okay,” Harry said slowly. He looked to the head table for help. His dad wasn’t there; he also disdained Halloween. Harry suspected his dad would be busy brewing potions all day. It was strange that they both had the instinct to bury themselves in work to endure their grief.

As Harry was, unnecessarily, escorted through the entrance hall, their group paused to watch Cedric and some other Hufflepuffs approach the cup. Cedric had a dazed, giddy expression as his friends goodnaturedly pushed him towards the Age Line. Harry saw the reason immediately: Cho Chang and her gaggle of friends were watching Cedric with dreamy expressions. Haruka Endo, who stood among the Hufflepuffs, saw Harry watching and gave him a nasty smile.

“Pigs,” Astrid muttered darkly. “Let’s go, Haz.”

“We could visit Hagrid,” Ron suggested as they left the Great Hall after breakfast.

Monty shrugged.

“Not me,” Neville said.

“No one asked you,” Ron retorted. “What do you say, Monty?”

“I’d rather not,” Monty said. He still hadn’t forgiven Hagrid for the skrewts. He didn’t know if it was something he *could* forgive, as Harry had nearly died. “We’ve got those books Flitwick wants us to read.”

“I think it’s a wonderful idea, Ron,” Hermione said. “I haven’t asked Hagrid to join S.P.E.W. yet!”

Monty held his tongue as Hermione ran up the stairs to retrieve her box of badges. Talking to Sirius about the issues he was having with his friends had helped, but Monty wasn’t up to talking to Ron or Hermione directly yet. Hermione would argue right back at him, and he was worried Ron would start yelling, or get into one of his moods. It was good to know that Sirius had also had problems with his friends in school. Apparently he had done something that made both Monty’s dad and Remus stop talking to him for months.

He was working up the nerve to ask Remus for advice too.

At any rate, it wasn’t the day for it. Monty didn’t want to ruin the excitement of the Triwizard Tournament by having it out with his friends.

Luna tugged on his arm, and Monty turned to see Madame Maxime leading the Beauxbatons students to the Goblet of Fire. Filch checked off something on his parchment, allowing them to pass one by one.

“We could look at the abraxan,” Luna suggested.

“Yeah,” Monty said, brightening. “I bet Hagrid knows loads about them. Why do you think they only drink whiskey?”

“Single malt whiskey,” Luna corrected.

“What about you, Nev?” Monty asked.

Neville, who had been edging towards the stairs, frowned thoughtfully. “I read something about abraxan manure as fertilizer the other day. It’s supposed to be good for aerial plants.”

Ron looked at them all like they were crazy. Then Hermione came rattling down the stairs.

“You’re coming too?” she asked Luna skeptically.

“Oh, yes,” Luna said excitedly. “I want to see if Hagrid is still infested with blibbering humdingers. His ears are big enough to host several colonies!”

Monty hid a smile at Hermione’s exasperation, then led the way out of the castle.

Harry pressed his palms against his eyes in frustration. He had found every book he could that made a reference to the Killing Curse, and none held the answers he needed, not even a hint.

He knew the incantation, he knew the caster had to sincerely want the victim to die, he knew the spell created a harsh green light. He had seen it for himself.

Unforgivable Curses and Their Legal Implications stated the Unforgivables had been designated so in 1717. It also said the Killing Curse had been created sometime during the Middle Ages, but had no details beyond that. No one was credited with its invention, there was no country of origin, there wasn't even a first recorded use of the spell.

Avada kedavra. The incantation was not in Middle English, nor Old English, nor any language in common use during the Middle Ages. Harry did not believe it had been invented then, so he kept searching.

He had unearthed a decrepit tome from the second century, written in Latin. The book was not in good condition, and nearly impossible to decipher. He had spent hours poring through it, ultimately finding an image of an amulet. The amulet was an old gemstone, though what kind was a mystery, engraved with the words *avada kedavra*. It was an Abraxas amulet, to ward off death and bad fortune. It hadn't worked for Severus Alexander, who had been assassinated. Harry would have to ask his dad if they were related.

The Killing Curse dated back to the second century, at least. But the incantation was not Latin. It had to be older. Harry was at a dead end.

He had put all the books away, save one. *Magick Moste Evile*. The author had apparently written it using an elder wand, and hadn't been brave enough to actually include the *moste evile* magic. He made oblique references to magics even someone so inveigled in the dark arts refused to perform. Harry thought he was a coward, and resented whatever knowledge the man had taken to the grave. Even worse, Godelot had written it during the Middle Ages, when the Killing Curse rose in prominence. He had been perfectly positioned in history to analyze it. Yet, there was nothing.

The Killing Curse did exactly what its name said. *How* it killed was something no one apparently knew, at least not in the books kept in the Restricted Section. It was frustrating to reach the limit of the knowledge Hogwarts was willing to store. He considered asking his dad, but could only imagine the reaction he would have knowing his son was interested in the Killing Curse. Harry thought about checking the Room of Requirement, but who would lose a book dealing in magics those who dabbled in necromancy could not tolerate?

Would Percy still speak to him, if he knew?

Harry shut the book, ignoring the wail it gave. The book didn't have any room to complain when it refused to yield the answers he wanted.

A dead mother, a scar, a wraith.

He leaned on the table, bracing himself against the inevitable conclusion.

If reading books would not solve the mystery of Monty's survival, Harry would take matters into his own hands.

"Where the hell have you been?" Astrid demanded.

"The library," Harry said, sitting down between her and Jasmine. "Where you left me."

"You were there all day?" Jasmine asked.

"Yeah."

"You missed the entire feast," Astrid said.

Harry shrugged. It was the day his mother had died, he would spend it however he wanted. He glanced at the head table. His dad looked unamused by his late arrival. He probably thought since he had to suffer through the feast, so did everyone else.

"What's that smell?" he asked, wrinkling his nose.

"Hagrid," Cassius said. For once, he didn't have a book out. Harry looked up at the head table again, and was surprised to see Hagrid sitting at the end. He hadn't had a meal in the castle for weeks, not since the skrewt incident.

"We think he's trying to impress Madame Maxime," Phoebe said.

"That explains the hair suit."

Professor Dumbledore stood, and the Great Hall went dead silent. The Goblet of Fire had been placed before him, quietly burning with its ethereal blue flame.

"The Goblet is almost ready to make its decision," the headmaster said. "When the champions' names are called..."

Harry looked around the Great Hall. The Beauxbatons students were sat at Ravenclaw table again, clustered at one end, while the Durmstrang students did the same at the Slytherin table. Crouch and Bagman sat among the professors. Bagman looked almost as thrilled as he had during the Quidditch World Cup, while Crouch appeared bored by the entire affair.

The tension in the Great Hall rose as Dumbledore took out his wand, sweeping his arm out to extinguish the floating candles. Harry shivered when the wand's arc passed over him. The remaining light came from the leering pumpkins floating overhead, and the Goblet of Fire. It cast strange shadows across the headmaster's aged face, and Harry was reminded of why Albus Dumbledore was considered the only wizard the Dark Lord feared.

"Any second now," someone whispered.

The flames in the Goblet rose, the heart of the fire blindingly white. All at once, the fire burned a menacing red. A tendril of flame lashed out, carrying with it a charred piece of parchment.

Professor Dumbledore nimbly captured the parchment, and the Goblet's flames receded, shifting back to blue.

"The champion for Durmstrang," the headmaster said, his voice ringing through the hall, "is Viktor Krum!"

The applause was deafening. Harry clapped politely along, while Viktor's fans lost their collective minds cheering him on, screaming his name, some even weeping in jubilation. Viktor seemed not to notice, rising from the table and slouching to the room the headmaster indicated. He acted resigned to being the Durmstrang champion, as did his fellow students. It would have been hard to be so famous and to *not* be chosen. As such, no one was surprised by the result.

Karkaroff was the loudest of all. "Bravo, Viktor!" his voice boomed over the tumult. Jasmine tensed next to Harry, her knitting needles making a resurgence. She held them as if preparing to stab one through Karkaroff's throat.

As the applause and shouting died down, the Goblet's fire bled back into red. Another lick of flame ejected a piece of parchment, and Professor Dumbledore caught it easily.

"The champion for Beauxbatons is Fleur Delacour!"

The applause was not nearly so enthusiastic as for Viktor Krum, but Fleur already had admirers among the students. She was beautiful, almost supernaturally so, and Harry knew from how the boys around him, and Astrid, responded to her presence that she had veela ancestry. Much like Viktor, Fleur did not acknowledge the uproar she caused. She held her head high, her silvery blonde hair flashing in the Goblet's blue glow. People had also cried at her announcement, several Beauxbatons students who were devastated they had not been named champion. Harry noticed Cedric watching avidly as Fleur walked past him.

"I hope it isn't Diggory," he said as he clapped.

"It won't be," Astrid said.

Harry kept clapping. "What did you do?"

Astrid smiled as the Goblet's fire turned red again.

Harry stared as the flames rose up, carrying the third and final slip of parchment to the headmaster.

“Astrid,” Harry whispered quickly. “What the fuck did you do?”

“The champion for Hogwarts is,” Professor Dumbledore began. He paused, straightening his glasses. “Harry Evans.”

At first, nothing happened.

Monty had never been so surprised in his life when the headmaster read Harry’s name. He thought Harry hadn’t entered. He hadn’t even seen him since breakfast. For a split second, Harry looked equally stunned by the announcement, but an easy smile slid onto his face as the Slytherin table exploded into raucous applause. One of the sixth-years fainted, nearly crushing her frog. The gobstones team all stood and saluted, an absolutely bizarre display.

The reaction from the rest of the Hogwarts students was more restrained. It took a moment for the Hufflepuffs to join the applause, some crying and consoling a confused Cedric Diggory. Luna had climbed onto the Ravenclaw table, green and silver sparks shooting from her wand. The reaction at Gryffindor was perhaps the least welcoming of all, as his house mates lamented the selection of a Slytherin champion over one of their own.

Monty wished he could show how happy he was for Harry, but it would have been suspicious. Harry would not have liked it.

“Mr. Evans, if you could please join the other champions,” the headmaster said, barely audible over the frenzy at the Slytherin table. Harry’s smile became slightly embarrassed, and he shook off his friends and began walking to the room where Krum and the Beauxbatons girl had gone.

“I can’t believe it’s *him*,” Ron moaned. “Why a Slytherin? It should have been Angelina!”

Fred and George were the most enthusiastic of the Gryffindors, chanting, “Evans! Evans!” as Harry rounded the head table and disappeared behind a door. Lady Madeleine slunk in just before it closed.

There was a terrifying roar, and the Slytherin quidditch captain, Astrid Urquhart, flipped the entire Slytherin table over with raw strength. She bellowed, “*Buaidh no bàs!*”

“Miss Urquhart!” McGonagall shouted, standing as plates and goblets crashed to the floor. “Severus, do something about this! Miss Lovegood, you are going to start a fire! Get down from there, you silly girl!”

Professor Snape took a deep draft from his own goblet, and did not respond. Next to him, Professor Burbage was laughing like a drain. Remus caught Monty’s eye and smiled.

Dumbledore shook his head, smiling indulgently as he used his wand to right the upended table. “Such wonderful support for your house mate. Now, we do have *three* champions, and I am confident you will all give your support to them...”

The headmaster trailed off. The applause became scattered, before dying down completely.

The fire in the Goblet had turned red again. A fourth piece of parchment shot out, the entire Great Hall tracing its flight. Dumbledore caught it, his expression turning grave. He stared at it longer than he had Harry’s. After some time, he cleared his throat.

“Monty Potter.”

Bare Minimum

Chapter Summary

Halloween, 1994 (continued)

Chapter Notes

The reponse last chapter was phenomenal! Thank you so much. It's amazing how engaged you all are.

Harry was gobsmacked, not believing the words the headmaster had said.

“The champion for Hogwarts is...Harry Evans.”

He smiled automatically, the barrier between what he felt and what he should feel thin as gossamer. He could not look at the headmaster, so he looked at his friends. Astrid pounding the table, Adrian laughing at Phoebe pretending to faint, Jasmine fanning herself with a half-finished sock, Terence smiling at him, the quiet acceptance around Cassius. Green and silver sparks cascading down.

An icy clarity settled over him, guiding his movements. Everything was muffled, as if he were viewing the scene from underwater. He was the Hogwarts champion, and it was an occasion he would rise to.

The headmaster helpfully reminded him what the next steps were. He stood, dragging the berserker Astrid up with him, then walked down the Slytherin table towards the room where the other champions awaited. Time stretched as he walked. The madness that had consumed the Slytherin table, Luna dancing and emitting sparks at the Ravenclaw table, Cedric being swarmed by mourners at the Hufflepuff table, Fred and George shouting from Gryffindor. The polite applause from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, ignorant of the house dynamics, of why a Slytherin muggleborn might be so divisive. He didn't dare look at his dad, who he desperately needed to back him up.

Harry kept smiling.

The door clicked shut behind him with a damning finality. Lady Madeleine brushed against his legs, making a plaintive chirrup.

“The lady doth protest too much, methinks,” he said under his breath, looking around the room. He could still hear the pandemonium in the Great Hall, what sounded like one of the tables being thrown across the room. Too late, his mind whirled with more compelling excuses. Leaning on the fear and respect for Professor Snape should have been sufficient. They should have known his lack of permission would have been enough evidence to convict. Perhaps they hadn’t cared.

He would have time to dwell on the consequences later. In the present, he was in an unfamiliar chamber, lined with portraits of witches and wizards he did not recognize. They watched him expectantly. He smiled at them, then strode across the room to join Viktor and Fleur beside a merrily burning fire.

Viktor, who had been staring moodily into the flames, nodded to him. Fleur looked him up and down.

“We are competing against each other,” Viktor said, sounding somewhat pleased by the prospect.

“It would seem so,” Harry said, crossing his arms.

“What is that?” Fleur asked, looking at Lady Madeleine. Lady Madeleine sat down like the perfect little lady she was.

“Madeleine, Princess of Mercia,” Harry said. “My dread companion.”

“She cannot be allowed,” Fleur said, narrowing her eyes.

“She’s a cat,” Harry said. “She does what she wants.”

Fleur pursed her lips, then turned to look at the fire.

“What sort of cat is she?” Viktor asked.

“She’s a half-kneazle.”

Their riveting conversation was cut short by the door opening again. Harry, expecting the headmaster, or perhaps Bagman and Crouch, turned to see who it was.

The smile froze on his face as his little brother entered the room.

“What happened?” Harry asked, instantly on guard.

Monty took a hesitant step forward.

“What is it?” Fleur demanded, tossing her head like one of her headmistress’ abraxan. “Do they want us back in the hall?”

“That isn’t it,” Harry said softly. He looked into his brother’s eyes, saw the confusion and growing panic within. “Monty, don’t tell me—”

The door burst open again, admitting Ludo Bagman with all the timing of a wankstain. He seized Monty's arm and pulled him towards the fire. Monty winced.

The fire roared to life, startling a shriek from Fleur. Viktor stumbled away, batting at his smoking robes. Bagman let go of Harry's brother, which was a fantastic idea if he wanted to keep his hand. Bagman had been put out to pasture after his quidditch career. It would have been better had he been sent to the glue factory.

Bagman eyed the fire nervously, then his face returned to its typical moronic state. "Well, something extraordinary has happened! Gentlemen, and lady, may I present to you the *fourth* Triwizard champion!"

Monty was still staring at Harry. Harry smiled reassuringly as the flames crackled behind him. He hoped Monty understood what he had to do.

Harry's smile vanished almost as soon as it appeared. He crossed his arms, and turned his attention to Bagman. Bagman took an inadvertent step back, sweat prickling his forehead.

"That's a very funny joke, Mr. Bagman," Fleur said.

"Joke?" Harry repeated, his voice dripping with contempt.

Bagman swallowed. "It's no joke, ah, Mr. Evans. Monty...Mr. Potter's name just came out of the Goblet of Fire."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Given the significant amount of brain trauma you experienced over the course of your career, I doubt you are capable of explaining exactly how such a thing has occurred. Is there someone competent who can enlighten us?"

Bagman flapped his mouth like a flobberworm choking on lettuce. It was fortunate for him that the door opened again, granting Harry's simple request.

Professor Dumbledore led the charge, followed by Mr. Crouch, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime ducking under the door frame. She stepped to the side, revealing Professor McGonagall, Harry's dad, and Professors Burbage and Lupin.

Harry looked at his dad, hoping to convey everything he wanted to before anyone caught on. He knew Monty needed him, more than ever, and Harry was useless. He had to hurt Monty now so he could help him later. Monty would forgive him. He was a good kid.

Fleur was complaining to Madame Maxime about the turn of events, while Viktor further withdrew into himself.

"What is the meaning of this, Dumbledore?" Madame Maxime demanded, towering over the headmaster.

Karkaroff easily matched her anger, his cold eyes for once showing signs of life. "*Two* Hogwarts champions?"

“C’est impossible,” Madame Maxime said, placing her hand on her precious Fleur’s shoulder. Karkaroff stood beside Viktor, whose expression had darkened once he understood what had occurred.

“C’est extremely fucking possible,” Harry muttered, drawing a sharp look from his dad. He rolled his eyes as Maxime and Karkaroff continued to bitch and moan.

“Potter’s wanton disregard for the rules is no fault of Dumbledore’s, Karkaroff,” his dad said acidly. “He is a consummate rulebreaker, just like his—”

“Thank you, Severus,” Dumbledore said.

Lupin had drawn Monty towards him, and Monty shot Harry a worried look. Harry stared coldly back, until Monty looked away.

Dumbledore approached Monty, and the room fell silent. The nosy portraits leaned forward in their frames. Professor Burbage had moved to stand next to Harry’s dad, her face tight with concern. Professor McGonagall looked like she wanted to bodily protect Monty from the vitriol being flung around. Mr. Crouch had been oddly silent, no doubt calculating how to recover his reputation from yet another scandal.

“Did you put your name in the Goblet of Fire, Monty?” Dumbledore asked, as if trying to lure a skittish animal.

“No,” Monty said firmly.

“Liar,” Harry said. Monty grimaced, but didn’t look at him.

“That is enough, Mr. Evans,” Dumbledore said, not looking away from Monty. “Did you ask an older student to do it for you?”

“No,” Monty insisted. “Why would I?”

“Like this other boy has said, he is lying,” Madame Maxime said. Harry’s dad shook his head, a look of complete disgust twisting his face.

“Really?” Monty asked her archly. “Do you not know who I am? I’m probably the most famous person in this room, next to Professor Dumbledore, and I have plenty of money. I don’t want to be in this tournament!”

“Viktor is also famous,” Karkaroff proclaimed, puffing his chest.

“Did he kill Voldemort too, then?” Monty asked, making the entire room recoil. Harry had to bite the inside of his cheek to stop himself from smiling. Monty pushed up his hair, revealing his lightning bolt scar. “Has he got one of these?”

“I believe you have made your point, Monty,” Dumbledore said.

Monty let his hair fall back down, looking around the room, challenging anyone to gainsay him. Harry snorted derisively. The back and forth among the adults continued for some time.

Lupin placed a reassuring hand on Monty's shoulder. Harry wondered where that had been for the past thirteen years.

"We must follow the rules," Mr. Crouch said, speaking for the first time. "The rules state clearly that whosoever's name is chosen by the Goblet of Fire is bound to compete."

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence as his words sank in. That Karkaroff and Maxime genuinely believed a fourteen-year-old stood a chance was a joke. They had apparently missed the memo on why there was an age limit at all.

Professor Burbage was the first to speak. "Should I get my axe?"

Mr. Crouch jerked as if someone had pulled his strings. "Axe?"

Dumbledore sighed. "A relic of Helga Hufflepuff's, Barty, which Charity has in the past used to great effect."

"Some good old fashioned goblin steel should take care of that cup," Professor Burbage said happily. "What's it made of, wood? Doesn't stand a chance!"

"No," Mr. Crouch said, shaking his head. "Absolutely not. I cannot even bear to think of the ramifications should the Goblet be destroyed."

"Ramifications?" McGonagall asked, looking at Monty.

"Death," Mr. Crouch said gravely. "The champions are magically bound to compete, a magical contract that supersedes any verbal or written agreement. The consequences of breaking troth...such magics demands the highest price of all."

Harry's arms reflexively tightened around himself. His brother's life was at risk whether he competed or not.

"You cannot simply hack your way out of something like this," Harry's dad said scathingly. "How convenient for you, Potter."

Monty glared at him, but didn't respond.

"Well, this *is* a pickle," Bagman said, wiping his face. "But, as Barty said, rules are rules!"

"The rules have already been bent, Bagman," Karkaroff said, rage coloring his tone. "They can be bent further. I demand we continue submitting students until each school has two champions!"

Bagman grimaced. "It doesn't work that way. The Goblet's already gone out, until the next tournament."

This comment raised more objections, more arguments from Madame Maxime and Karkaroff. Given they were the heads of two prestigious magical schools, Harry had expected them to be more intelligent. It was increasingly clear that neither saw this as an opportunity to build bonds, but as a means of getting one over on Hogwarts, and each other.

Once their tantrums had subsided, both Maxime and Karkaroff reaching some sort of acceptance, Mr. Crouch spoke again.

“The first task,” Mr. Crouch said, “will test your daring, your courage in the face of the unknown. As such, I shall not tell you what it is.”

This paucity of information did not bother Harry. Bagman had a sponge for a brain. Harry would get the information he needed, one way or the other. His dad saw him eyeing Bagman, and thinned his lips in a warning. Not with Dumbledore around.

“You may neither ask for nor accept any help from your professors,” Mr. Crouch continued. “For the first task, you are only permitted to bring your wand. Once you complete the first task, you will then receive information on the second. On a happier note, as champions you are exempt from your end-of-year exams.” Mr. Crouch looked at Dumbledore. “Is that all, Albus?”

“There are some other matters we must address,” Dumbledore said, looking at Monty, then Harry. “Monty is the seeker for the Gryffindor team. Mr. Evans is a prefect, and, as that astounding badge indicates, the captain of his house gobstones team.”

“What are you saying, Albus?” McGonagall asked, breaking out of her reverie. “That Potter and Evans cannot participate in their teams? Surely you wouldn’t strip Evans of his prefect badge!”

“No, of course not,” Dumbledore said lightly. “However, the tournament is a significant investment of time.” He looked knowingly at Severus. “Which is why I proposed we cancel various club activities.”

“Excuse me, professor,” Harry said, drawing Dumbledore’s attention. “I’m not certain I heard you correctly. Are you suggesting that we cancel gobstones?”

Fleur scoffed, which Harry ignored.

“Not cancel,” Dumbledore said soothingly. “Perhaps a more diminished role.”

“And what of Potter?” McGonagall demanded. “He’s the seeker, Albus! Gryffindor has no reserve seeker, unless...” She confronted Harry’s dad. “A certain third-year is allowed to play!”

“A dilemma indeed, Minerva,” he said drily. “The most pressing concern tonight. Which child will you strap to a broom?”

“You want me to give up quidditch?” Monty asked. “This isn’t even my fault!”

“A likely story,” Harry said. “I have said it before, and I shall say it again,” he said, his voice resonating through the chamber as the candles stuttered and dimmed. “Merlin himself could rise from his watery grave, issue forth from Avalon in all his terrible might, and demand I cease playing gobstones. I would curse him once more into his Lady’s cold embrace, and watch him slowly drown in her sepulchral waters.”

The fire gave an ominous *crack* that echoed through the chamber, a log crashing into the coals.

“Damn,” Professor Burbage whispered. His dad covered his face. Lupin pulled Monty closer to him, while McGonagall placed a hand over her chest. Crouch was completely nonplussed, and Bagman began wiping his face again. Karkaroff and Maxime both looked confused. Viktor seemed mildly intrigued, while Fleur asked, “This is regarding *gobstones*?”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “You needn’t go that far, Mr. Evans. It was merely a suggestion. Now, why don’t you and Monty run along. I am sure Gryffindor and Slytherin are eager to celebrate...”

Monty followed Harry into the deserted Great Hall, watching the older boy’s rigid back. Harry was angry, and Monty was not sure why.

“I’m sorry,” he said as they stepped into the entrance hall.

Harry stopped walking, and suddenly Monty’s ears popped.

“I didn’t put my name in,” Monty said. “You have to believe me. I don’t want—”

Harry turned abruptly and walked to the antechamber where the first-years waited to be Sorted.

“We don’t have much time,” Harry said, narrowing his eyes as he looked around the room. He took out his wand and cast spells so quickly Monty couldn’t follow. “I don’t want anyone to overhear us.”

“Okay,” Monty said uneasily. “But, really, I didn’t—”

“I know you didn’t,” Harry said, still casting spells. “I’ll tell you another secret, Monty. I didn’t put my name in either.”

“You what?” Monty said.

“I don’t want to be a part of this tournament, probably even less than you do,” Harry said, finally looking at him. The anger had vanished from Harry’s face. Instead, he looked troubled.

“Did you get taller?” Monty asked.

Harry frowned, then looked at his sleeves. “Bloody hell,” he muttered. “That doesn’t matter. Listen. The headmaster didn’t say it, but getting the Goblet to select a fourth champion is an absolutely terrifying display of magic. Someone *very* powerful wanted you in this tournament, and, unless I misread him, Dumbledore hasn’t got a clue why.”

Monty's stomach dropped. He already felt his prospects for completing any of the tasks were not good, particularly if someone like Harry was meant to face them.

"I have to compete," Monty said.

"Yes," Harry said. He pinched the bridge of his nose, a look of intense concentration on his face. "They want to test our daring... The first task must involve dragons."

"What?"

Harry laughed, but he didn't sound very amused. "Just trust me. It's dragons. Hopefully *one* dragon. I don't want to have to fight *two*."

"Why would you fight two dragons?"

Harry gave him an incredulous look. "Do you think because they said you can't ask professors for help, you couldn't get help at all?"

"But why would you help me?" Monty asked. "I mean, you're the one who was chosen. Don't you want to win?"

Harry snorted. "I don't have a choice, do I? And I told you, I didn't put my name in. Unlike you, I think whoever's behind me being in the tournament has good intentions. I could have entered if I wanted to, you know, even without Snape's permission. I *chose* not to. Reckon I didn't make that clear enough."

Harry rubbed his face, his expression rather annoyed. He shook his head, then looked back at Monty.

"Don't worry about the tournament," Harry said. He stepped closer to Monty, a conflicted expression on his face. Harry hesitated, then pulled Monty into a hug.

"I'll take care of it," Harry said quietly. "I won't let you get hurt. I promise."

Monty felt a sudden chill, and hugged Harry back. It was strange, how much better it made him feel.

Harry pulled away, placing his hands firmly on Monty's shoulders. His expression was grave, but his eyes shone with determination.

"Listen closely. I've got a plan..."

Harry waited until his brother had reached the second floor, Lady Madeleine stalking him from the shadows, then made his way into the dungeons. He needed to talk to his dad, but he had to deal with his friends first. As the headmaster had said, they were waiting to celebrate.

Harry downed a Calming Draught as he neared the common room. He was going to need something stronger. He had initially been furious at his name coming out of that wretched Goblet, but as soon as he saw Monty, as soon as he knew what had happened, he felt immense relief. He could have helped Monty from the sidelines. Hell, he could have polyjuiced as Monty and done the whole bloody tournament for him. But, as a fellow champion, ostensibly *the* Hogwarts champion, Harry was better positioned to help. His friends inadvertently fucking him over was actually a good thing.

He paused at the entrance to the Slytherin common room, contemplating another Calming Draught. He was tempted to apparate to Romania and wipe out their dragon population. True, it would make Monty sad, and make Percy's brother unemployed...

"*Amortentia*," Harry said. The wall slid apart, and he was bombarded with an unrelenting cacophony. The common room was packed to the gills. His friends had gathered in the center, surrounding a basilisk-shaped cake with its head cut off. Harry hoped no house-elves had been traumatized in the making. Goblets were overflowing with butterbeer, gillywater, and for a few of the seventh-years firewhiskey. They looked disappointed, but pleased that one of their own got in the tournament. Killian had arranged a celebratory gobstones game, a seven-way match that was given a wide berth. Some of the fourth-years had drawn a banner that read *Potter is a Rotter!*, and looked quite proud of it. Draco had a sour look even as he applauded, having to reconcile *mudblood* and *Slytherin champion*, tempered by his hatred for Monty. First- and second-years were flying through the air, giggling at their weightlessness.

Phoebe was standing on a stool, singing at the top of her lungs, Felipe croaking along. "Beat back those bludgers, boys, and chuck that quaffle in! No team can ever best the best of Slytherin!"

"We would have had real music," Adrian shouted, joining Astrid to carry Harry forward. "But *someone's* cursed all of his things!"

A Slytherin flag was thrown over Harry's shoulders, and he grimly bore it, a bemused smile plastered on his face. It was late, he was tired, it was the day his mother had died, his brother's life was on the line, the Calming Draught struggled against his volatile emotions, his mind was exhausted.

It was too much.

But his friends were happy, and Harry tried his best to be happy for them, even as Astrid paraded him around on her shoulders, and Terence sprayed him with butterbeer. Harry wiped his face and joined his stoners for a victory round.

The inquisition could wait.

It took hours for Monty to escape the common room. Everyone wanted a piece of him, everyone wanted to know how he'd got in. No one listened when he said he hadn't done anything, they didn't care. They were just glad it was a Gryffindor, that it was the Boy Who Lived. He wasn't just the hero of the hour, but of the century. He was plied with butterbeer, with sweets, with crisps, anything they could shove in front of him. Monty was crushed from all sides, and glad he had left Hester in her cage. She would have grown to her full size and reigned terror on the common room.

Monty wanted to go to bed. He wanted to talk to Sirius. But he had taken Harry's words to heart. The divide between Gryffindor and Slytherin was too wide to bridge in a normal year, and the tournament would only cause it to deepen. It was natural for a Slytherin champion to resent Monty stealing the spotlight. If Harry was to openly support Monty, to offer his help, his entire house would turn against him. Would someone learn that Voldemort had killed one of Harry's parents? That the other was a Death Eater? What would happen to Harry if that got out?

So Monty played along as best he could while maintaining his innocence. It didn't matter if no one believed him, the people who were important did. Harry, his professors. He was certain Neville and Luna would, as Neville was one of the few people who wasn't thrilled by Monty being a champion. He understood how dangerous the tournament was, he had listened to Hermione's lectures on past tournaments. How many people died. Monty was barely a fourth-year, with only a fraction of the magical knowledge the other champions had. He didn't even think Krum and Delacour could hold a candle to Harry, who had always seemed so far ahead. He'd already worked out what the first task was, and Monty trusted his judgment completely. And Charlie had made some remark about seeing them soon. Dragons made sense.

Monty lost track of time, and the party continued deep into the night. His thoughts kept straying to the homework he had to do, the life-threatening challenge he would face in a few short weeks, wanting to talk to Harry, wanting to talk to Sirius, wishing he was anyone other than the Boy Who Lived.

His scar, the dream, the prophecy. Harry said they had to tell someone about it, that it was too big for just the two of them. He said he would take care of it. Monty didn't question Harry's motives. His parent had been killed by Voldemort too.

Monty eventually broke free, hurrying up to his dormitory as another round of applause began. Did he live in a seal colony? Thankfully, the dormitory was quiet and empty, the only sound the ringing in his ears. He shut the door firmly behind him, sagging against it in relief. He grimaced when he realized he'd forgotten to rescue Neville.

"Oh, hello."

Monty started, then noticed Ron lying on his bed, fully clothed.

"Have you been up here the whole time?" Monty asked.

He gave Monty a sickly grin. Confused, Monty tried to untie the banner wrapped around him. Lee had done too good a job with the knot. Frustrated, Monty got out his wand.

“*Laxorum*,” he snapped. With a *swoosh* the banner unknotted, sliding onto the floor.

“So,” Ron said, still lying down. “Congratulations.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Monty muttered, walking to his bed. “Don’t tell me *you* think I put my name in. You were with me all day!”

“Did you use the invisibility cloak?” Ron asked.

“Yeah, Ron, I used *my* invisibility cloak,” Monty said sarcastically, wishing he’d never opened it in front of Ron. It was just another thing for Ron to be jealous of. It wasn’t as if it was the only thing of his dad’s that Monty had, the only Potter heirloom he possessed, one of the few connections he had to a family he had lost and would never regain. “Your powers of deduction are astounding. Well done, you’ve cracked it.”

Ron narrowed his eyes. “Well, whatever you did, you could have told *me*.”

Monty snorted. “I didn’t do anything. Someone else put my name in.”

Ron pushed himself up, giving Monty an incredulous look. “Why would they?”

“Take a wild guess, Ronald,” Monty said. “Not two months ago there were Death Eaters prancing about.”

Ron scoffed in disbelief. “Pull the other one. You know, you could have at least told your best mate how you’d done it. I don’t know why you’re bothering to lie.”

“You know what?” Monty said, absolutely done with Ron, “believe what you want. I don’t care. I’ve got more important things to manage than your fragile ego.”

“What did you say to me?” Ron demanded, his voice rising in pitch.

Monty climbed into his bed, spelling the curtains shut. He cast a silencing charm, and Ron’s obnoxious voice finally cut out. He took off his glasses, putting his face in his hands.

It was fine if Ron didn’t believe him. If they really were *best mates*, Ron *should* have believed him. Ron expected more from Monty’s friendship than he was willing to offer in turn. It was the bare minimum, to trust your friends. Sirius has spent twelve years in Azkaban for it.

After a moment, Monty got out his two-way mirror. He had bigger concerns than Ron. Harry had asked for a favor. Monty had work to do.

At the knock on his door, Severus finally relaxed. He was going to have a hellish Monday, but his son needed him. He would endure.

Harry slid into the room, looking oddly collected despite the ongoing rager in the Slytherin common room. His cat trotted in after him.

“Who was it?” Severus asked.

Harry shut the door behind him. “I think they all conspired together, except Cassius and Jasmine. Neither of them can afford to get in trouble. I haven’t had the chance to investigate the others. And that’s not why I’m here.”

“Potter,” Severus began.

His son threw himself into a chair and gave Severus a dejected look.

“Your brother,” he amended, “has got himself into a very dangerous situation.”

“You know he didn’t put his name in,” Harry said, not rising to the bait. “You know when he’s telling the truth.”

Severus inclined his head. “You understand why I must act otherwise.”

His son flopped around like a newborn foal. “Did you change my potion?”

Severus smiled slightly, but said nothing. Harry rolled his eyes.

“What did you wish to discuss?” Severus asked.

Harry pulled himself together, his expression turning grim. He took a breath, then looked directly into Severus’ eyes. “There is something I have to tell you. Something I should have told you months ago...”

At It Again

Chapter Summary

November 1st, 1994

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“There were two sisters, side by side...”

Harry rocked side to side, in time with his hurdy-gurdy. After speaking with his dad, he hadn’t been able to sleep. Instead, he unearthed his instrument, tuned and rosined it, and spent the late hours teaching himself how to read sheet music. The low droning as he turned the wheel helped calm him down.

“I’ll be true unto my love, if he’ll be true to me...”

He didn’t know what time it was, only that it was early. The quality of the light had shifted, even in the heart of the dungeons. Harry knew he would have to get out of bed, eventually, and face the day. His fellow Slytherins supported him, but he knew which way the wind blew.

“He never bought the eldest a single thing...”

Harry’s bed shook, and the notes faded away. It wasn’t a happy song, anyway.

Carefully setting his hurdy-gurdy aside, he opened his curtains to see Jasmine and Phoebe struggling under the shrieking, spitting swooping evil.

“Sister, I’ll not give you my hand,” Harry said, tugging his shirt down. “What are you two doing in here?”

“Help,” Phoebe squeaked, letting her head fall back and her tongue loll out.

“Should’ve listened to Astrid,” Jasmine wheezed.

“Lucky for you she’s marched everyone else to quidditch practice,” Harry said, releasing them from the clutches of the plush toy. “I need to automatize resetting this trap. Maybe stick him in the ceiling.”

Jasmine pushed herself up, patting her hair. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“Not specifically you,” Harry said. “So, what’s going on?”

“We have to get you ready for your debut!” Phoebe said, getting to her feet with an alacrity inappropriate for such an early hour.

Jasmine seized his hand. “Chipped varnish! Unacceptable!”

Harry winced. It wasn't *that* bad.

“And must it be black?” Phoebe asked. “It *does* go with your whole...” she waved her hands around. “Thing.”

“Thanks.”

“What about mauve?” she suggested.

“No, he’s too pale for that,” Jasmine said, frowning at Harry’s paleness. “Same with orange.”

Harry blinked. “Orange. I recognize that word. It is a color I know.”

“He has that lovely cloak,” Phoebe said. “Forest green.”

“Green, yes, I recall seeing that color once before.”

“Just the once?” Jasmine asked, looking around at the extremely green furnishings of his dormitory.

Phoebe reached for his hair. Harry froze as she tugged on it, cooing over him. He shuddered at her expression.

“Okay, no, that’s enough,” Harry said, batting them away. “I’m not a doll you can dress up.”

Jasmine pouted at him. “Astrid won’t let us.”

“She bit me,” Phoebe boasted.

“That tracks,” Harry said. “Are you two staying in here, or am I allowed to get dressed on my own?”

“What are you wearing?” Jasmine demanded.

“Robes,” Harry said. “The same thing we all wear every day.”

“You should wear muggle clothes,” Phoebe said.

Harry closed his eyes, trying to work out what the two girls were thinking. He was the Hogwarts champion, he was a muggleborn. They knew what the opinions about Slytherin, and him in particular, were. There were going to be a lot of bruised feelings for the next few weeks, if not months. Until he killed a dragon, or whatever the first task was.

“You want me to lean into it,” Harry said. “The muggleborn champion.”

“Shove it in their stupid faces!” Phoebe declared, raising her fist. Poor Felipe, who she had been holding, made an unhappy, and very loud, sound that was startlingly similar to a yowling cat. “Sorry!”

Harry rubbed his face. “Fine. Since it’s the weekend, I will wear muggle clothes. I’m not going to be like Professor Burbage, though. I’d get points taken off if I went around looking like a muggle all the time.”

“Fair enough,” Jasmine said, taking out her wand. She tapped his hand, and the black varnish restored itself.

“I feel like Cinderella,” Harry said, watching her do the other hand.

“Who?” Phoebe asked.

“How long have you had that on?” Jasmine asked.

Harry scratched his head. “A year?”

Jasmine and Phoebe both gave him dumbfounded looks.

“Boys,” Phoebe said, shaking her head mournfully.

“Absolutely hopeless,” Jasmine agreed.

“Cheers,” Harry said insincerely. “Now clear off so I can get my muggle kit on.”

Harry stuck his hands in his pockets and strode into the Great Hall. It was early, and a Sunday morning, yet most of the castle was already up. They couldn’t miss the champions walking in.

The response from the Slytherin table was immediate. People were standing up, cheering, shouting his name. Harry smiled insouciantly and made his way to his people.

“Captain, Captain!” Tracey cried out. “Can I have your autograph?”

“Are those *muggle* clothes,” Jason Mulciber asked. The kid probably had never seen a muggle, unless it was one his family was torturing.

“Make way for the king!” Adrian shouted, still in his quidditch robes. Astrid had apparently ended practice early. “Our benevolent muggleborn overlord!”

“Not everything comes down to blood status,” Harry said, dropping into a seat next to him. “I do have a crown I got out of a cracker. Should I have worn it?”

“Yes!” Phoebe said, gripping the table. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

Harry shrugged, scooting aside to let Lady Madeleine hop onto the bench. “What’s that you’ve got?”

“Mrph.”

Curious, Harry took the item from her mouth and held it up. It was another bracelet, braided with black hair.

“What is it?” Terence asked. “I can’t see anything.”

“That’s a good thing,” Harry said, slipping it on. He looked down the table, and saw Theodore Nott staring at him. At the bracelet. Harry grinned at him, and the boy blanched, quickly looking away.

“I can’t believe Potter,” Astrid said, gritting her teeth. She had kept her keeper gloves on, her hands balled into fists. It was a little scary, given how the gloves weren’t meant to do that. “First he steals snitches, then he steals the tournament. What next?”

Harry sighed, pouring himself coffee. The house-elves had put out a pretty ceramic cafetière, which gave Harry a pang of homesickness. They were too clever by half.

“Who cares about Potter?” Harry said. “He doesn’t stand a chance.”

Adrian laughed, slapping his back. “You’ll crush him like a pair of gobstones.”

“How do you think gobstones is played?”

“What’s the first task?” Terence asked.

“Don’t know,” Harry said. He reached into his pocket, fingers brushing his wand, and cast a silent *muffliato*. “They wouldn’t tell us. Said it’s to test our courage.”

“Maybe you have to fight a boggart,” Jasmine suggested.

Harry’s blood ran cold. If they put a boggart in front of him... “That’s optimistic. A third-year could handle a boggart.”

“Maybe you have to rescue a beautiful prince,” Phoebe said dreamily.

“From his mother, maybe,” Harry muttered. “There’s no use speculating. It’s meant to be a surprise.”

“Meant to be?” Astrid asked, leaning forward. “You’ve already worked it out, haven’t you?”

“Of course he has, the bastard,” Adrian said, vigorously stabbing a sausage. “He’s Harry.”

Cassius cleared his throat. He had been oddly silent since Harry’s name had come out of the Goblet of Fire. It was another reason Harry hadn’t wanted it. To give Cassius a chance. Even

thinking that, Harry felt like a shit friend.

“Congratulations,” Cassius said evenly.

Harry shook his head. “You don’t have to.”

The table fell silent.

Jasmine sighed. “You really don’t.”

“I would have always wondered,” Cassius said. “I knew what they were up to.”

“You four aren’t exactly subtle,” Jasmine said.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. “Wondered what?”

“If your name hadn’t been in, which one of us it would have been,” Cassius said. “And now I know.”

“I want to know *how* they got away with it,” Jasmine said, looking between Astrid and Adrian.

“Is now the time for this?” Harry asked, just as Astrid and Adrian said, “Diggory.”

Harry sighed. “Is that why he keeps looking at me?”

“I Confunded him,” Adrian said proudly.

“Imperius,” Astrid said.

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose. “Is this a nightmare? Have I slipped into another coma?”

“Another?” Jasmine asked.

“Oh, dear,” Phoebe said. “Terence is not doing well.”

Terence was, indeed, having a minor fit.

“I can’t believe you said that, out loud,” Cassius said, shaking his head.

“Cas was trying to have a heart-to-heart with Harry!” Phoebe chastised.

“Said it?” Jasmine nearly shrieked. “I can’t believe she *did* it! Astrid, what in Merlin’s name is wrong with you?”

Astrid huffed. “I wasn’t going to fuck about, not after what that gobshite did.”

“What did Diggory do?” Adrian asked, glancing at Harry. “*Did* he do something to you, mate?”

“He’d be dead in the ground if he had,” Astrid said darkly.

“He doesn’t remember, anyway,” Harry said to her. “I Obliviated him.”

Astrid grinned. “Savage, Haz.”

“I’m sorry,” Jasmine said, putting her hands on the table. “Why are we openly discussing casting Unforgivables at breakfast?”

“Harry put up a silencing charm,” Cassius said, picking up his book. “And if Lupin can use it on fourth-years, why can’t we use it on Diggory?”

“*We*?” Jasmine said shrilly.

“We’re all culpable now,” Cassius said, smiling slightly. “Unless Harry Obliviates us.”

“Could you?” Terence asked, having recovered.

“I hate everything about this conversation,” Harry said. “But yes, if you really want me to muck about your mind, I could.”

“Do me first,” Jasmine said, exposing her neck. “I’m ready.”

“I’m not a vampire,” Harry said. He picked up his coffee and gave it a probing look. Had the house-elves laced it with something?

“Can we go back to Harry knowing what the first task is?” Phoebe asked. “Since Cassius refuses to bare his soul.”

“Why are you wearing muggle clothes?” Adrian asked.

“I asked him a question first!”

“I’m dispelling the charm,” Harry said over the incipient bickering, getting everyone’s attention. He turned to face the entrance to the Great Hall, through which a scrawny, specky, glory hound had just sauntered. “We can talk more about how we’re all going to Azkaban later. It looks like the competition has arrived.”

Ron was already gone by the time Monty woke up.

“Small mercies,” he muttered, sliding his glasses on.

“You’re awake, Monty?” he heard Neville call out.

“Yeah, morning,” Monty said.

Hester flapped her wings. "*Monty sad.*"

"*I'm not sad,*" he hissed back.

"What was that?" Neville said.

Monty closed his eyes, focused on speaking English. "Nothing." He unlatched Hester's cage, and she climbed onto his arm.

"*Owl.*"

"*No.*"

"*Bacon.*"

"That's better," Monty said, shifting her to ride on his shoulder. "Has everyone else gone to breakfast already?"

"Yeah," Neville said, appearing from around his own bed. "How are you feeling?"

Monty sighed. "Could be worse."

"How?"

Monty laughed. "I'm glad someone believes me."

Neville made a face like he was going to be ill, but he rallied. "You looked really happy when Evans' name came out. I don't think cheating to get in is something you'd do. It doesn't make sense."

"Thanks, Nev," Monty said, relieved he still had one friend in Gryffindor. "Want to get breakfast? We can eat in the kitchens if it gets too bad."

The few people in the common room broke into applause when they saw Monty. Monty smiled gamely, avoided eye contact with the frantically waving Creevey brothers, and a blushing Ginny. Hester's claws sank into his shoulder.

"This is worse than when I win at quidditch," Monty muttered.

"At least that's something you've earned," Neville pointed out.

"Yeah, well, they might not let me play this year," he said.

"What?" Neville asked as they reached the portrait hole. "Why not?"

The portrait swung open, revealing Hermione. She was carrying a stack of toast.

"Morning," Monty said, climbing out of the hole.

"I brought you this," Hermione said, offering the toast.

Monty gave the bread an aggrieved look. “Thanks, but I don’t fancy cold toast for breakfast.” He’d had enough of that at the Dursleys.

He walked down the corridor with Neville, Hermione keeping pace.

“I thought we could go for a walk,” she said hurriedly.

“We are walking, Hermione,” Monty pointed out. “What’s going on with you?”

“It’s just that, well, Ron’s at breakfast,” she said, nearly dropping the stack of toast.

“And?” Monty said, exchanging a look with Neville.

“He isn’t in the best mood,” Hermione said.

“What’s that got to do with the price of dragon livers?” Monty asked, drawing a startled laugh from Neville.

Hermione frowned. “I’m not sure I understand what you mean.”

“Is he still going on about me entering myself?” Monty asked.

“A bit,” she admitted, quickly adding, “but he doesn’t believe that, not really.”

“Fantastic,” Monty said, striding across the entrance hall. “Then I don’t see the issue.”

“Monty, wait—”

As soon as he stepped foot into the Great Hall, the Gryffindor table exploded into applause. So did the Hufflepuff table next to them, and even some people at Ravenclaw. Monty stopped for a moment, stunned that Harry’s prediction had been exactly right. He saw Harry looking at him from the Slytherin table, raising an eyebrow as his house mates booed and hissed. He was wearing muggle clothes, a shirt with a large green seahorse on it. This small detail stood out to Monty as he tried to process what he had just walked in to.

“Do you want to go to the kitchens?” Neville quietly asked.

Hermione’s reluctant expression hardened. “You know where the kitchens are?”

“Too late for that, Nev,” Monty said, heading for the Gryffindor table. He saw Ron immediately, sitting with Dean and Seamus among the sixth-years. Ron wasn’t clapping.

“Petty,” Monty said, sitting at the table. Hermione slammed the toast down next to him. Neville grimaced, then sat on Monty’s other side.

“He’s not *petty*,” Hermione whispered harshly, sitting down. “He’s jealous!”

“That’s so much better,” Monty said, nodding at a few people who were still cheering. He wished they would shut up already.

“It’s because you get all the attention,” Hermione explained.

"I know why, Hermione," Monty said, piling warm, fluffy eggs onto his plate. "I'm not stupid. I don't like when you talk down to me."

"I do not!" she said.

"Actually," Neville began.

"No one asked you, Neville!"

Monty squeezed his eyes shut.

"Actually," Neville repeated, more loudly. "You *do* talk down to people, Hermione. That's why no one wanted to be your friend in first year."

Monty opened his eyes again, giving Neville a small smile. He looked over at Hermione, and saw to his dismay that she was near tears. She stormed away without another word.

"*Someone* finally said it," Lavender said. "She's been driving me up the wall for *years*."

"Let's drop it, okay?" Monty said, not interested in slagging off Hermione with the girls in her dormitory. "Am I allowed to have breakfast?"

Lavender shrugged, and went back to talking to Parvati. Monty couldn't imagine how awkward it was to share a room with a group of friends you were excluded from. He felt a pang of guilt, but pushed it aside. Hermione couldn't dish out criticism and expect not to receive any in turn.

"Sorry, Monty," Neville said morosely.

"Don't be," Monty said, pulling a plate of sausage to himself. "She wasn't thinking about my feelings at all."

"Hello, Monty. Hello, Neville."

Luna appeared like a will-o-wisp in the place Hermione had vacated, her fine hair in a cornsilk halo around her head. She had forgotten to brush it.

"Can I call you Fleamont?" Luna asked. "No one ever does."

"If you want," Monty said, feeling lighter in her presence.

"What are we doing today?" she asked, making up a plate for herself.

"I wanted to go to the library," Monty said. "But that's where Hermione usually hides."

"We could go to the greenhouses," Neville suggested. "She never goes down there, except for class."

Luna's eyes lit up.

"We can even do our homework there," Neville said. "Professor Sprout lets me, sometimes."

Monty looked around the Great Hall. He didn't want to be near any of them that day. Hester shifted on his shoulder, and he smiled to himself. He wrapped a few pieces of bacon in a napkin.

"Sounds grand."

Dumbledore quietly observed the students in the Great Hall, while also showing a healthy appetite. Severus drank his coffee black and ate nothing. His already low opinion of the students plummeted to previously undelved depths.

Charity nudged him, nodding at the Hufflepuff table. "Look who wants to go crawling back to the boy he jilted."

Severus took a sip of coffee so as to not sick up on the breakfast table. Cedric Diggory looked befuddled, and just so happened to be staring at Harry. Diggory had obviously been Confused by someone heavy handed with their charms.

"I believe it was the other way around," Severus said, frowning slightly. It was not something he would ever be interested in, the banal relationship drama the students bandied about, but that was his son she was referring to.

Charity nodded to herself. "Evans is a tough nut to crack."

"For god's sake," Severus muttered.

"And he's got on muggle clothes today," she cheerily added. "Solidarity!"

"Foolish boy," Severus said.

"You think so, Severus?" Dumbledore asked, not at all ashamed of eavesdropping. "I believe it's rather the opposite."

Severus scowled.

"Would you join me in my office?" Dumbledore asked, standing. "There are some matters I wish to discuss."

"Ooh, someone's in trouble," Charity teased.

"Your Scotch pancake Tower of Babel is collapsing," Severus said, ignoring Charity's cry of dismay as he stood to follow the headmaster.

They walked in silence through the castle, if one ignored Dumbledore humming to himself. Severus crossed his arms. He would have to share the information Harry gave to him with the

headmaster. Harry had known that, had anticipated it. At sixteen, his son was already wiser than him.

When Severus had heard a prophecy, he had run straight to his master, with no thought of anything but what boon the Dark Lord might grant him. Harry had waited, for months, until circumstances forced his hand.

His son trusted him.

When they reached the headmaster's office, Dumbledore forwent offering Severus a seat.

"I take it Mr. Evans did not enter himself willingly," Dumbledore said, already knowing the answer.

"It was impressed upon me that his participation in the Triwizard Tournament would be beneficial," Severus said, neither confirming nor denying that Harry's house mates had magically manipulated another student into entering his son's name.

Dumbledore sighed, then let it drop. "At least we can be certain of the motives there."

"You wish to discuss Potter," Severus said. "Very well. I have come across some pertinent information."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Have you?"

"Yes," Severus said levelly. "It has been brought to my attention that Trelawney has been at it again. Among other minutia."

The headmaster leaned forward, folding his hands together. "What has she Seen?"

Chapter End Notes

The song is [Two Sisters](#), by Clannad

A Bit Disgusting

Chapter Summary

November 1994

Harry rubbed his eyes, trying to banish the headache that threatened to form. The dragon section of the library was well-stocked, if one was a dragon fancier. The books on dragon breeding and rearing had been removed by Madam Pince, after Hagrid had attempted to hatch an egg in his hut. They had been relocated to the Restricted Section, where Harry's research into dealing with dragons had ultimately led him.

It was late, well past curfew, the only time Harry could guarantee he would be alone in the library. Barring ghosts, house-elves, portraits, Filch, and Mrs. Norris. Harry was drained, crushed under the weight of his responsibilities. It had barely been a day since his brother's name had come out of the Goblet of Fire, and already he understood why Dumbledore had suggested a *diminished role*.

He would likely be exempt from prefect rounds, which he would have to ask the Head Boy and Head Girl to arrange. He doubted he would get a warm reception from them, as neither had been chosen as champion, and they were from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw respectively. The other Slytherin prefects would likely cover for him. Jasmine would.

Harry picked up *A Dragon-Keeper's Guide*, a disheartening read. Dragon-keeping wasn't a solitary venture. Dragon-keepers worked in big teams. Heavy chains and excessive use of stunning charms were used to restrain and disable dragons. Monty could cast a stunning charm, but not one powerful enough to knock out anything bigger than a hatchling. Monty's Transfiguration class had not begun conjuration, and wouldn't until next term. Three weeks of independent study wouldn't get him to the level of professional dragon-keepers.

Harry had flirted with the idea of killing the dragons outright. Even creatures resistant to magic were not immune to the Killing Curse. But, given dragons were protected, and moreover from a reserve, he doubted the task was to kill one. It was a worst case scenario. If he had to kill one to protect Monty, he would.

It had occurred to Harry that he might be wrong, that the first task did not involve dragons. But, between the letter Percy had asked him to forward, Charlie saying to Monty and his friends he would see them soon, and Crouch saying the task would test their daring and courage... Harry was too tired to think of what else it could mean. Maybe he'd have to fight a dragon-keeper.

A wand, that was all they were allowed.

Harry flipped through *Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland*. He knew the reserve had a Norwegian Ridgeback, he'd help send her there himself. They catered to a variety of dragons. Harry had to be patient to learn more. For the time being, he could only throw a broad net.

Monty was simply too young and inexperienced to try any spells directly on a dragon, potentially a full grown dragon. And, thinking about it more, Harry wondered if they were expected to fight a dragon at all. The dragons were from a sanctuary. Would Percy's brother consent to one of the dragons being harmed? Harry didn't know Charlie well, but he doubted it. The man was passionate about dragons, he had devoted his entire life to caring for and protecting them. And, as all the books indicated, a single witch or wizard could not hope to stand against a dragon. Unless they were someone like Dumbledore. A student would be roasted alive.

Most students.

If they weren't fighting a dragon, what were they meant to do?

Harry picked up *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*. Curious, he opened it to the first page.

He closed it again, blushing.

"Meow?"

"I'll explain when you're older," Harry said, packing up his things. He looked around the dark, silent library, then slipped the book into his bag. For research purposes.

Harry made sure to lock the library behind him when he left, even though it had never kept anyone out. Then again, most students weren't doing illicit late night research.

Lady Madeleine padded ahead, leading him down the cold corridor, past sleeping portraits, suits of armor flexing their freshly oiled joints, the Fat Friar who turned his nose up and pretended Harry wasn't there.

Harry pulled his cloak tighter around himself, not concerned at being caught out. He expected he would get more free reign as the Hogwarts champion. It was probably the only benefit he'd receive, aside from not having to do exams. He frowned, wondering how he would remain at the top of the class. He'd had to talk to his dad about that. He wasn't sacrificing his chance at being Head Boy for a tournament he hadn't even wanted to participate in.

Lady Madeleine raced up the steps to the Owlery, eager to menace the owls. Harry followed at a slower pace, still deep in thought. He had to devise strategies his brother could use against a dragon. Monty took Care of Magical Creatures, but Harry knew they hadn't covered dragons yet. Hagrid might have some deeper knowledge about dragons, and he was no longer a professor. Approaching him for help would not violate the rules.

Harry reached the top of the stairs and came to a stop.

Why did he care about following the rules?

Harry let out a frustrated sigh, then looked around for a lively owl. Most of the owls were nocturnal, and were thus more active at night. They flew in and out of the open windows, hunting the grounds, stretching their wings, doing owl things. The owls who preferred dawn, day, and dusk were mostly asleep, and had their own section so as not to be bothered by the comings and goings of their night-loving peers.

“Hoo.”

Harry held out his arm automatically, and was surprised to see it was Hedwig who landed.

“You should be asleep,” Harry said, stroking her breast feathers. “It’s been a while.”

Hedwig clacked her beak, turning to glare at his dad’s long-eared owl, Iseult, who was wide awake.

“I don’t want to know,” Harry said, taking a letter from his pocket. With a whispered charm, it affixed itself to Hedwig’s leg, leaving her claws and beak free for hunting. Hedwig nibbled his hair, fanned her tail feathers at Iseult, then took flight.

“And Hedwig shall show her the meaning of haste,” Harry said, drawing an irritable bark from Iseult. Laughing quietly to himself, Harry grabbed Lady Madeleine before she pounced on a pygmy owl and left the Owlery. Even he needed to sleep sometimes.

The kettle on his desk gave a melodious whistle, letting Percy know the water was ready. He chose a tea bag from a box labeled *masala chai*. Harry had added a note, saying it was good with sugar and milk. Percy planned on adding a pantry to his room to store muggle sundries, once he found the space for it.

As he poured hot water over the tea bag, the spiced scent that lingered around the box of tea blossomed into a full-bodied aroma, filling his room. Percy’s eye fluttered shut as he breathed it in. The warmth of cinnamon, a memory of the refreshing, lemony-mint crunch of cardamom between his teeth, the complex, earthy bitterness of clove. Percy sighed, smiling slightly, waiting patiently for the tea to steep.

A peck at his window brought his attention back to the present. He opened his eyes, startled to see it was Hedwig perched on his ledge. He picked up his wand and silently opened the window for her. She flew in, settling on his desk, and held out her leg. Puzzled, and a little worried, Percy untied the letter. His pulse quickened when he saw Harry’s handwriting.

“You can sleep in here,” Percy said, conjuring a bowl and water for her. “The garden gnomes are at your disposal.”

Hedwig hooted softly in acknowledgement.

Why had Harry sent her on an overnight flight? It wasn't in his character to misuse owls. Moreover, why had he used Monty Potter's owl?

Tea forgotten, Percy quickly broke the seal on the letter.

Dearest Percy,

I fear it would be unwise if we met in Hogsmeade. You see, I was chosen as the champion for Hogwarts.

The how and why of it are irrelevant. I was chosen, therefore I am a champion.

There is a more concerning matter. I was not the only Hogwarts student who was chosen. The Goblet of Fire lit a fourth time...

"Good morning, Mr. Crouch," Percy said, hastily standing at his desk. Miss Jorkins was back from her long weekend, so Percy had returned to his less impressive cubicle.

"Weasley," Mr. Crouch said, looking more severe than usual. "Is there anything pressing that occurred during my absence?"

"Not pressing, sir, no," Percy said. "We received a missive from the former Ministry of Yugoslavia regarding the muggle's ongoing war in the region. They are seeking support in shielding the remaining magical enclaves, and some areas magical creatures inhabit. In particular, there is a lake in the north where a group of *boginki* reside."

Mr. Crouch's lips thinned.

"I've left a full report on your desk, sir," Percy added.

"Very good, Weasley," he said. "I'll have to speak with the Minster regarding that."

Mr. Crouch turned to walk away.

"Sir, how did the champion selection go?" Percy asked.

Mr. Crouch paused, his eyes growing distant. "Ah, yes, you're curious about your brothers. I'm sorry to say that the Goblet chose another student. Evans. A sixth-year Slytherin, I believe. Viktor Krum was selected for Durmstrang, and a Miss Fleur Delacour for Beauxbaton. Part-veela, if I'm not mistaken. It should make for an exciting tournament." Mr. Crouch's expression darkened slightly. "There was, however, an aberration.

“An aberration, sir?”

“Yes,” Mr. Crouch said. “A fourth champion was selected. Monty Potter.” His mouth twitched, and he added, “We should release a statement to the *Daily Prophet* before they catch wind of it. Bertha will need to contact them, and Ollivander, to arrange the Weighing of the Wands. Work with her on that, Weasley. Say it was a malfunction. I don’t want a *hint* of malfeasance getting to the public.”

“Yes, sir,” Percy said, his trepidation growing. “And what of the Goblet?”

Mr. Crouch looked at him. “Elaborate.”

“Should we not examine it?” Percy asked. “This is highly unusual.”

“I have already returned it to the Department of Mysteries,” Mr. Crouch said, turning away. “It is in their hands now.”

Percy watched as Mr. Crouch walked to his office, then sank back into his seat. He didn’t know what was happening. How on earth had Monty been chosen as a champion? How had his name got in? How had the Goblet of Fire chosen four and not the three it had for *centuries*? Had the headmaster had the chance to analyze the Goblet? Mr. Crouch was right in that it should be examined by the Department of Mysteries, where it had been kept for two hundred years. They were the experts, whoever *they* were. What sort of magic could even be used to so thoroughly change the purpose of a magical artifact? Percy had no idea how the Goblet of Fire worked, or where to get started in investigating it.

It wasn’t his job.

Gritting his teeth, Percy turned to his desk and began outlining a press release. His brother’s best friend was in a tournament where over half of the participants died in horrific ways. Harry was in that same tournament, and reading between the lines Percy could tell he was not pleased with that. Had someone put Harry’s name in against his will? The safeguards that had been in place were unforgivably lax. Something as simple as checking whose name was written down would have been sufficient to prevent *two* people from being unwilling participants.

Why did Mr. Crouch seem more annoyed by it than anything? Was it because the tournament he had worked so tirelessly to revive was already embroiled in scandal? Percy imagined the delegations from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons were outraged at Hogwarts having two champions, willing or not. Not to mention one of them being the Boy Who Lived.

Percy wrote the word *malfunction*, then lifted his quill. Never once, in hundreds of tournaments, had the Goblet of Fire malfunctioned. It was a lie. Something had been done to it to make it act against its nature, Percy was certain of that, and he very much doubted any student was equal to such a feat.

He breathed slowly in and out, banishing the creeping sense of foreboding that threatened to consume him. Percy pictured what it would look like in the *Daily Prophet*, Monty being forced to participate portrayed as some sinister plot against him. Maybe someone simply

wanted to see what he was capable of, wanted to challenge the public perception of the Boy Who Lived. Whatever the cause or the reason, that the Triwizard Tournament had been so easily interfered with reflected poorly on the Ministry, and their department in particular.

Percy's thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of a Howler. Not in his in-tray, but via a vicious eagle owl flying directly for Mr. Crouch's office.

"Good morning, Weather..." Mr. Jordan began, trailing off. "How did that owl get in here?"

The Howler was abandoned midair, and the owl shot off, flapping into a lift. The grille slammed shut.

"Smart bird," Mr. Jordan said, taking a sip of coffee as the Howler burst into flames.

BARTEMIUS CROUCH!

DO NOT THINK I HAVE FORGOTTEN, YOU PATHETIC, SELF-RIGHTEOUS, PRETENTIOUS PIECE OF SHIT! BUT THIS ISN'T ABOUT ME! YOU DARE FORCE A FOURTEEN YEAR OLD BOY TO PARTICIPATE IN YOUR SHITTY TOURNAMENT? PEOPLE HAVE DIED, CROUCH! I HEREBY VOW THAT IF MONTY GETS A SINGLE SCRATCH IT'LL BE YOU IN AZKABAN FOR THE NEXT DECADE! THE DEMENTORS WOULD STARVE TO DEATH, YOU SOULLESS BASTARD!

Mr. Jordan slowly lowered his mug as Sirius Black's rant continued unabated. He turned to look at Percy.

"What the hell happened?"

Nothing had changed. When Monty had woken up for the first day of lessons after the champion selection, Ron was already gone. He walked through the common room, met with the same applause, and the entrance hall, and the Great Hall.

Hermione wasn't talking to him either, and seemed to be holed up in the library. Monty thought it was real rich of her, considering how much time she spent pointing out the deficiencies in those around her. He made *one* remark, and that was too much. He didn't know how their friendship would last, if she kept treating him like he was stupid. He had the top marks in fully half the classes they shared, a fact Hermione often ignored. It was like all she had was being the smart one.

Monty knew that wasn't true. Hermione was kind, thoughtful, observant, passionate, and could be really funny. He liked *that* Hermione, not the one who shoved her intelligence down their throats, the one who lashed out at anyone who disagreed with her, especially when they were right.

Breakfast was no worse than most days. It had a similar atmosphere to that which had permeated Hogwarts in his first year. He was the Boy Who Lived. Everyone wanted a look, an autograph, a photograph. The difference was, instead of asking to see his scar or if he remembered what Voldemort looked like, they wanted to know how he'd done it. How he'd got his name in. It didn't matter how many times he said he didn't remember what Voldemort looked like, that he didn't put his name in the Goblet of Fire, they didn't hear him. As if Monty Potter wasn't really there.

Things got worse in Herbology. Neville stuck to him like a limpet. They were usually paired up, as Monty wanted to get a good grade and Neville wanted a partner who wouldn't take the piss out of him. Normally they would work near Hermione and Ron, but Ron walked up a tray of bouncing bulbs as far from Monty as possible, and Hermione joined him. Instead, he and Neville were repotting their tray with two boys from Hufflepuff.

"I'm glad it's you, Potter," Justin Finch-Fletchley said. Monty grabbed the bulb Justin was handling before it smacked him in the face.

"If it couldn't be Cedric," Ernie Macmillan qualified. "Rotten deal for him."

"Especially after what Evans did to him," Justin said, with an expression of urbane distaste.

"What are you on about?" Monty asked.

Ernie glanced around, then leaned forward. "There were rumors, you know. When they were *dating*."

"Bit disgusting, isn't it?" Justin said. "Two blokes?"

Neville made a strangled noise.

"No," Monty said, developing an immediate and intense dislike for Justin Finch-Fletchley.

"What rumors?" Neville managed to ask, driving the trowel he held into the soil.

"That he used a love potion on Cedric," Ernie said in a grim understone.

"Come off it," Monty said, exasperated. "He wouldn't do that."

"Cedric's been acting funny all week," Justin said, his expression darkening. "We were all expecting him to get chosen, you know. Strange that it was Evans."

"He's the best student in his year," Monty pointed out, holding back from listing all of Harry's achievements. "Better than Diggory."

Ernie gave him a knowing look. "Starting to add up, is it?"

“What?”

“Professor Sprout’s coming round,” Neville said quickly, shutting the two Hufflepuffs up.

When class was over, Monty was almost looking forward to how the Slytherins would treat him.

“We don’t have to work with them again,” Neville said, hurrying to keep up with him. “Susan and Hannah are nicer.”

Monty slowed down. “Hannah Abbott? She’s on the gobstones team, right?”

To his amazement, Neville started to blush.

When they reached the shore of the lake, the Slytherins were already there. Monty kept his expression neutral, deciding it would be best not to engage with them. If they gave him a choice.

Tracey Davis flipped him off, which almost made Monty laugh. She was one of the less visible Slytherins, unassuming in her big glasses and pigtails. But she was on the gobstones team, and Monty understood why she was upset.

“Fuck you, Potter!” she shouted, startling the girls around her. Vincent Crabbe stood next to her in all his intimidating bulk, crossing his arms and glaring hatefully at Monty. Monty had no idea someone could pack on muscles by playing gobstones. “Captain Evans will obliterate you! The grounds will run with your blood! You shall know him by the path of destruction left in his wake!”

Neville made a distressed noise.

“Cheating your way into the tournament was very unsportsmanlike,” Crabbe said calmly. It was the longest sentence Monty had ever heard him say.

Draco Malfoy, who was clustered with the remaining Slytherin boys, eyed the two gobstones players—the stoners—uneasily. “Yeah, Potter. How long do you reckon you’ll last? Ten minutes?”

Addled by the pincer attack from the gobstones team, Monty said offhandedly, “Better than your dad. I heard he can barely last five.”

“Monty,” Neville said desperately. “Don’t antagonize them!”

Malfoy went completely red. “What did you say about my father?”

Thankfully, Professor Grubbly-Plank showed up, a box of nets floating behind her. She took a puff from her pipe, breathing out a cloud of lilac smoke.

“The flying seahorses have just spawned off the western bank,” she said, indifferent to interhouse rivalries and tournaments. She was a woman with a mission, and her mission was teaching them about creatures. Monty respected her for that. “Well, what are you all waiting

for? Grab a net! Professor Snape's stock is running low. We will be fishing for adult males *only*. Now, to distinguish between the male and female flying seahorse..."

Harry was minding his own business, eating dinner and thinking about dragons, when a very angry owl flew into the Great Hall. Harry looked up as she passed overhead, a blood red envelope sizzling in her claws.

"I wonder who that's for?" Jasmine asked as the bird dove at Professor Dumbledore.

Dumbledore graciously accepted the Howler, inclining his head to the owl. She carried off the chicken he had been eating, beating her wings to escape the blast zone.

The Great Hall fell silent as the headmaster opened the Howler.

DUMBLEDORE, Sirius Black's voice boomed, *YOUR INCOMPETENCE IS STAGGERING. HOW COULD YOU POSSIBLY ALLOW A FOURTEEN YEAR OLD TO PARTICIPATE IN A DEATH TOURNAMENT? AND YOU'RE LETTING HIM TAKE THE BLAME? 'GREATEST WIZARD OF MODERN TIMES' MERLIN'S SAGGING ARSE! WHAT DID YOU PUT AROUND THAT BLOODY GOBLET? AN AGE LINE AND FILCH? ARE YOU MENTAL? NEGLIGENT! PURE AND SIMPLE! BELIEVE ME, I'VE HEARD THE STORIES OF WHAT GOES ON IN THAT CASTLE! POSSESSED PROFESSORS? BASILISKS? I DON'T THINK I NEED TO MENTION HOW EASY IT WAS FOR AN AZKABAN ESCAPEE TO GET IN! FURTHERMORE...*

Harry covered his mouth as Black's rant continued. Astrid was openly laughing, drawing a look of reproof from Professor McGonagall.

After several minutes, when the Howler fizzled out and set the tablecloth on fire, Dumbledore stood up to address them all.

"I have been assured that the Goblet of Fire is currently being analyzed by experts at the Ministry," Professor Dumbledore said. "Our preliminary investigation has revealed that Monty Potter did not put his name in the Goblet of Fire. As his godfather helpfully elucidated, Mr. Potter is being forced to compete in a very dangerous tournament, entirely against his will. Now, I believe it is time for pudding!"

Dumbledore tucked his beard in and sat back down.

Astrid scoffed. "Bullshit."

Harry looked away from the headmaster, not sure how to feel about what had just transpired. Dumbledore hadn't said it outright, but Monty being forced to participate was not a cause for celebration. People were acting like it was all a game. He doubted they'd be laughing if they were put up against a dragon.

"What do you think, Harry?"

He looked up at his friends, who were watching him expectantly.

"It doesn't matter whether Potter cheated or not," he said. "I'm still going to win."

Dealing with Dragons

Chapter Summary

November 1994

“Evans! Hey, Evans!”

Harry readjusted his gobstones case under his arm, turning to see what Draco Malfoy wanted. Draco had commandeered one of the tables in the corner of the common room, and was joined by several other students. All were looking very pleased with themselves, in a malicious sort of way.

“What is it, Malfoy?” Harry asked, walking over. “I’ve got gobstones.”

“This is more important than gobstones,” Draco said dismissively.

Harry drew up next to him. “I beg your pardon?”

Graham Montague backed away. “I’m out.”

Harry watched him go, then turned back to Draco. “Would you care to repeat yourself, Malfoy?”

“No, sir,” Draco said hastily. “I mean, what?”

“We made something we think you’ll like,” Pansy Parkinson said, stepping in for the flailing Draco. Greg nudged him, and Draco finally showed Harry what he had been working on.

It was a badge. A large badge, which, in glowing red letters, said

Support HARRY EVANS —

The REAL Hogwarts Champion!

“Technically true,” Harry said. “Why’s it red?”

“Because of this!” Draco said dramatically, pressed the badge. The letters shifted, and now read in glowing green

POTTER STINKS

“Clever charm work,” Harry said, picking up the badge. “I’m assuming yours, Parkinson?”

Pansy smiled smugly. “Draco did the transfiguration.”

“Well done,” Harry said, setting the badge back down. “Bit long winded. I say keep it simple. Something like *Evans Rules, Potter Drools*. And maybe switch the colors. Red’s too Gryffindor for me.”

Pansy nodded eagerly, taking down notes.

“Talk to Jasmine,” Harry suggested, “she’s got more of an eye for this sort of thing. She’s the one who did the gobstones poster.”

Harry gestured to the poster, which featured a spewing bottle-washer that sprayed anyone who got too close.

Draco coughed. “Rookwood’s work is inspired.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, walking away. “By me.”

“Harper?”

“Present.”

“Pritchard?”

“Here!”

“Pritchard...the elder?”

“Here.”

“Crabbe?”

“I’m here.”

“Davis?”

Tracey snapped to attention. “Present, sir!”

Killian sighed, checking off her name. “Wilkes?”

“Present,” Derek said, tossing a gobstone in one hand.

“Alright,” Killian said, closing the attendance log. “That’s everyone.”

Harry surveyed his team, doing a headcount. “Something’s different.”

A chubby little girl with vibrant red hair stood silently next to Derek. She had put her hair in twin tails, tied with two green bows, and was holding a bag that rattled promisingly with gobstones.

“I can’t quite put my finger on it,” Harry said.

“Mafalda wants to join the team,” Graham piped up.

“I see,” Harry said, looking at Mafalda. She stared back at him, her gaze hard as steel. “You strike me as more of a wizard’s chess player.”

Tracey gasped. Vince wrung his hands together. Graham was poleaxed, and Bridget pulled him closer to her to more easily defend. Derek shuffled away from Mafalda. Ethan looked absolutely revolted by what he had just heard.

Killian sighed again.

“Wizard’s chess is boring,” Mafalda declared, lifting her chin. “The pieces do all the fighting for you.”

Harry waited for a moment, then smiled at her. “Welcome aboard.”

“Brilliant,” Killian said, opening the attendance book again to add her name. “Mafalda Prewett, first-year. Type of gobstone?”

“Amethyst,” Mafalda said proudly.

Harry nodded. “We can work with that.” He walked to the shrine set up to honor his late grandmother. Her picture, clipped out of an old *Daily Prophet*, scowled at him. Harry solemnly lit two black tapers, and the candlelight reflected off the myriad gobstones placed on her altar. “Prewett, you will be paired with Crabbe. The goal is to have one hundred and fifty games played by the time the gobstones tournament—the only tournament that matters—comes around. Since you’re joining late, you’ll need to play at least seven games a week. Is that understood?”

“I can do that,” Mafalda said.

Harry’s back stiffened.

“We call him Captain Evans,” Tracey explained. “And Killian’s Vice-captain Avery.”

“Okay,” Mafalda said.

Harry turned back around. “You struck at the heart of this evening’s meeting, Davis.”

Tracey stood bolt upright, her eyes going wide. “Sir?”

“Given my participation in the Triwizard Tournament, I have decided to expand the leadership of our team,” Harry said, walking up to Tracey. She pushed her glasses up and stared back, her mouth set in a firm line. “It’s also Killian’s O.W.L. year.”

“Don’t remind me,” Killian muttered.

Harry ignored him. “This is the most difficult decision I have made in my entire life,” he said, walking past his team. “It is a decision that will set the course of gobstones for generations. Centuries. *Millenia*.”

He stopped in front of Derek, who gripped his gobstone so tight it squealed. Harry sighed. “Captain Lament would have crushed it into dust. But you’re young, Wilkes. You’ll learn.” He turned around and walked back down the line. “I cannot understate how critical a moment in time this is. Captain Prince is watching over us,” he said, gesturing to her picture. She sneered, then walked out of the frame. “In spirit,” Harry continued, finally coming to a stop.

Harry closed his eyes, the weight of the gobstones world on his shoulders. When he opened them again, he saw the zealous mien of Tracey Davis.

“Davis,” he said, “you are promoted to lieutenant.”

Tracey swooned, but quickly collected herself and saluted. “You honor me beyond mortal comprehension, Captain!”

Killian rolled his eyes, opening the book again to update Tracey’s title.

“With that,” Harry said, snapping open his gobstones case. The sunstones sparkled up at him, like dying stars plucked from the heavens. “Let’s get stoned.”

Harry parted ways with his team at the entrance to the Slytherin common room, then walked back through the dungeons to begin his round of the castle. Without Percy as Head Boy, he was no longer getting his preferred days and floors. Slytherin prefects, in Head Girl Fawcett’s mind, belonged in the dungeons.

Since nothing much happened in the dungeons, it wasn’t a bad route. It gave him time to read, skateboard, run around as a squirrel, practice spells, whatever he wanted. There were no portraits in the dungeons, and only rare sightings of the Bloody Baron. Peeves avoided the dungeons entirely, not wanting to get on the Baron’s bad side.

He walked down a corridor, wondering if it would be too audacious to jump the stairs in the entrance hall, when he heard a scuff.

Harry stopped walking to listen. Sometimes a wind blew through the twisting, damp corridors. Torches were occasionally lit. Mostly not, particularly in the rarely visited areas. Lady Madeleine had run off to stalk Mrs. Norris, still learning the trade of a castle cat, discovering all the secret spaces only cats could get to.

After a moment, Harry began walking again. He walked down several indistinguishable corridors, still listening for anything amiss. He turned a corner and stopped walking. He heard several light footsteps, until they stopped too.

Smiling, Harry disillusioned himself, then cast a charm he had never had the opportunity to use. It was the sort of thing Fred and George Weasley would like, something to lure people, distract them, set up a prank. Or, more importantly, to run away from danger.

"Falsius vestigus," he said under his breath, watching the words turn to mist. The spell moved away from him, creating a sound identical to his footsteps. He was amused to see it left tracks.

He waited patiently as his pursuer quickened their steps to catch up again. Harry was unsurprised to see who it was. He waited until they were past him, then removed his disillusionment.

"It's past curfew, Prewett," Harry said.

Mafalda jumped a foot in the air, then spun around, her chest heaving.

"Usually, I would give you detention," Harry said, crossing his arms. "But since this is your first time getting caught, I'll let it slide."

"How did you do that?" she demanded.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Magic." He pushed himself off the wall. "Come on, I'll walk you back to the common room."

"I know how to get there," she said huffily. "I memorized the map."

"It's not a dynamic map," Harry explained, waiting a moment to make sure she followed. "The castle shifts around. The dungeons themselves are not fully mapped. I'm not entirely sure it's possible, there seems to be no end to them."

Mafalda didn't respond, just stomped along behind him. Harry smiled to himself. Little kids being angry never failed to cheer him up.

"Confundus," Harry said, watching the wall slide open. "In you go."

Mafalda pouted and walked into the common room. It was mostly empty, save a few seventh- and fifth-years studying. Killian looked up from the book he was reading, his jaw dropping when he saw Mafalda.

She turned around to look at him. "Aren't *you* coming in?"

Harry waited.

“Captain?”

“No,” Harry said, checking his watch. “I’m still on duty. And you’ve got History of Magic in the morning.”

Mafalda made a face, then stormed up to her dormitory.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Killian said, starting to get up. “I’ve got an essay due in Runes, and—”

Harry waved him off. “Don’t worry about it. Later.”

He waited for the common room door to close again, checked his watch, and headed for the seventh floor.

Behind his charmed curtains, in what little privacy he had of late, Monty lay on his back and watched a tiny Hester fly in circles above him. He had found a box of Cockroach Clusters in his trunk, a gift from Hermione and Ron when he’d been banned from Hogsmeade, and broke off pieces to toss up at her.

Hester snapped them up happily, doing little loops. She was about as long as his hand, and rarely got smaller than that. It got harder to eat things, according to Hester.

“*Outside*,” she said hopefully

“*When you are better at listening*,” Monty said. “*You are very powerful, and you have to be responsible with that power.*”

Pleased with this reasoning, Hester grew to a foot long and curled around Monty’s head.

Something whispered from under his pillow.

“Monty...”

He sat up, Hester tangling her claws in his hair and flapping angrily, and pulled the two-way mirror out. He smiled when he saw Sirius.

“Did they respond?” he asked eagerly.

“It’s nice to see you too,” Sirius said grinning at him. “Things have been mad here.”

“Same,” Monty said. “Ron’s still being a right git.”

Sirius’ grin turned sad. “He’ll come around or not. You can’t control how he feels.”

“I know,” Monty said, shifting. “So, dragons?”

Sirius shook his head. “First, I’ve talked to Dumbledore, a floo call. He’s convinced there’s no way to get you out of this thing.”

Monty nodded. He thought it might be a lost cause.

“As for the dragons,” Sirius said, “honestly, I still can’t believe it worked.”

“It was Harry’s idea,” Monty said, suppressing a smile. Since the dragons were likely from the Romanian sanctuary, Harry’s idea had been for Sirius to pose as a magizoologist researching dragons. He wanted Sirius to owl them and ask a few questions. What sorts of dragons they had, how many, and so on.

“They really like talking about dragons,” Sirius continued. “They even invited me for a tour. Think I should go?”

“Obviously,” Monty said, grinning.

“Maybe we can go over the holiday,” Sirius said. “Now, for the bad news. They have a fuckton of dragons. Opaleyes, Fireballs, Welsh Greens...”

“Let me write this down,” Monty said, spelling his curtains open to get some parchment and a quill. Hester tried to fly out, but he caught her before she got far.

“*Bad occamy*,” Monty hissed, shutting his curtains again.

“*Good occamy*,” she countered, shrinking to escape his grasp.

“Was that Hester?” Sirius asked. “How’s occamy training going?”

“She’s a quick learner,” Monty said, shaking the self-inking quill until it dripped ink.

“Alright. What breeds do they have?”

Monty crouched by the portrait hole, hidden under his invisibility cloak. It was impossible for him to go anywhere unnoticed, not with everyone and everything in the castle watching him. Ron made it so awkward in the dormitory, especially with his bed next to Monty’s. He wondered if Dean or Seamus would switch; he wouldn’t make Neville put up with Ron.

He looked down at the Marauder’s Map, feeling impatient.

He didn’t deserve it. He didn’t know how to get Ron to stop. Yell at him? Challenge him to a duel? Gone along with what the Hat said and sorted into Slytherin? Monty wasn’t sure he even *wanted* to do anything. None of it was his fault, even Dumbledore had said so. Or did Ron think Dumbledore was lying on his behalf?

Monty didn't understand.

When the portrait hole opened, admitting sixth-years returning from Astronomy, he slipped into the corridor. He didn't want to waste any more time thinking about Ron, not when he had to think about how to survive the first task.

When he got to the tapestry of the dancing trolls, Harry was already waiting for him.

"I heard back," Monty whispered. The trolls, frustrated with their lack of progress, began clubbing Barnabas the Barmy.

Harry shook his head slightly and didn't respond. He walked back and forth before a blank stretch of wall three times. A polished brass door appeared. Harry opened it, leaving it ajar for Monty to slip in.

Once the door was closed, Monty pulled off his invisibility cloak and looked around the room. It was a large, plain chamber, not unlike an empty classroom.

Harry visibly relaxed when the door was closed, then turned around and smiled at Monty. "How have you been?"

"Better," Monty said, shoving his cloak into a pocket. "Ron's still not talking to me, and Hermione's been avoiding me."

"Yeah," Harry said, running a hand through his hair. "I'm not exactly happy with my mates either." He sighed. "It hasn't even started, and I already hate this tournament. I'm glad no one's blaming you, though."

Monty frowned. "It's not fair."

"No, it's not," Harry said, smiling slightly.

"I mean to *you*," Monty said, frustrated. "I don't know why they think I'm, I don't know, better?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Really?" He looked around the room, pulled out his wand, and conjured two chairs. Monty sat down right away, crossing his arms.

"Reckon I do," he admitted. "The whole Boy Who Lived thing."

"That's part of it," Harry said, also taking a seat. He leaned back, balancing on two of the legs. "There's a lot of things I've got going against me. Being a muggleborn—"

"But you're not," Monty said.

Harry kept looking at the ceiling. "It shouldn't matter. Point is, people think I am. So. I'm a muggleborn, I've been the top student since first year, I'm in Slytherin, I'm poor, I'm gay. Take your pick. People will even make up reasons if they don't have a valid one, like claiming I potioned or cursed someone. Then they look at Cedric, for example, who comes

from an old family, is handsome, has some modicum of talent at quidditch...I think you get my point.”

Monty’s feeling of guilt increased. The Potters were an old family. He didn’t know about his looks, but he *was* good at quidditch. And he was a Gryffindor. The headmaster had been in Gryffindor. It wasn’t *dark*, like Slytherin.

Harry abruptly sat up, the chair legs hitting the floor. “It’s not your fault, Monty, or mine. It’s simply the way things are.”

“Why don’t you sound bothered by it?” Monty asked heatedly.

Harry tapped his head. “Occlumency helps, but also I know something they don’t.”

“What?” Monty asked.

Harry smiled. “That I’m going to win. It’ll blow their fucking minds. So, Sirius got back to you?”

Monty started smiling too, and pulled out the notes he had taken.

“Could you hold that up?” Harry asked, his wand appearing again. “I’m going to teach you a spell.”

“What is it?” Monty asked, holding the parchment out.

“*Geminio*.”

Harry read over the list Monty had written, watching as his brother attempted the Doubling Charm.

“It’s a sixth-year charm,” Harry said absently, frowning when he saw some of the dragons had recently laid eggs. That didn’t bode well.

“When did you learn it?” Monty asked, looking up at him.

Harry frowned thoughtfully. “Third-year? Fourth-year?”

Monty nodded, then redoubled his effort.

“You can practice that later,” Harry said, standing up. He vanished the chairs, and put the dragon notes away. It was borderline insane to use nesting mothers. What if the eggs were harmed? “Thanks for getting this. It’s a lot less work for me.”

Monty gave him a concerned look. “Shouldn’t I be doing more?”

“That’s why we’re in here,” Harry said, reaching into his robes. “Run.”

“What?”

Harry pulled his hand out and flung his squishy swooping evil toy into the air. He pointed his wand at it. “*Engorgio!*”

The swooping evil swole to a massive size, shrieking and beating its abominable plush wings. The undersides were a shimmering midnight blue, splayed against a backdrop of the darkest night. It’s back was a spiked green carapace that clacked ominously as it moved. The head was a lupine skull with viciously long fangs.

“What is that?” Monty shouted, hastily taking out his wand.

“*Mobilipupus!*”

The swooping evil gave another hideous cry, then a putrid orange fluid began shooting out of its mouth.

“Harry, what the hell is that thing?” Monty shouted, narrowly avoiding getting sprayed.

“It’s a mega swooping evil,” Harry explained, watching his brother run around the room.

“I know it’s a swooping evil!”

“It wants to eat your brains,” Harry said, smiling when his brother used a shield charm to block another torrent of orange fluid.

“*Stupefy!*” Monty yelled. The spell slammed into the plush toy in a burst of red light. The toy shrieked again, and flew at Monty.

“I’m puppeting it,” Harry said, vanishing a puddle of goo so his brother wouldn’t slip. He sighed, realizing he should have set it on fire to make things really authentic. “A Stunner won’t work against a dragon, and it won’t work against this.”

“*Bombarda!*”

The swooping evil glided through the spell, untouched.

“What did you do to that thing?” Monty demanded, sprinting past Harry.

“I made a few modifications,” Harry admitted.

“*Expelliarmus!*”

Harry tightened the grip on his wand, not letting it go anywhere. “Nice try.”

He kept sending the toy at his brother, observing as Monty ran through his repertoire of spells, growing increasingly desperate.

Monty growled in frustration when his *incendio* failed to incinerate the toy. “I don’t know what to do! Nothing’s working!”

Harry directed his humongous toy to land, giving his brother a break. “Exactly.”

He walked over to the swooping evil, flipping it over to sit on the soft side.

Monty was doubled over, breathing heavily, and covered in rancid orange goo.

“Lesson one,” Harry said, drawing an angry look from Monty. “Don’t fight dragons.”

At the Core

Chapter Summary

November 1994

Astrid slammed her fist into the pile of feathers she had conjured. Professor McGonagall pursed her lips, but didn't say anything, turning to help another student who had only managed to conjure half of a bird and burst into tears as it sluggishly bled on his desk.

"Great lesson," George muttered, looking at his own dead chicken. His wand had been pointed upward when he cast the Bird Summoning spell. A single bird had emerged, and immediately crashed headfirst into the ceiling.

Harry didn't need the practice. He already knew how to cast the spell, and was working on refining it. Number of birds, type of bird, eliminating the explosive sound that typically accompanied the conjuration. The Transfiguration classroom sounded, and smelled, like they were on a group hunting trip, flushing out the birds and shooting them down en masse.

The lesson wasn't going well, as was true of most animal conjuration lessons. The ways in which conjuring an animal could go wrong were numerous and gruesome, and rarely ended well for the animal summoned. Feathers, blood, and the squawks of dying birds filled the classroom, as did the growing frustration and horror of Harry's classmates. Astrid angrily swept the feathers off her desk and tried the spell again.

"*Avis!*" she growled, and with a loud bang several birds shot out of her wand, three sparrows. What was wrong with the sparrows was immediately apparent. Their wings were on backwards, and instead of flying they fell to the ground, struggling to right themselves.

"Wands away," Professor McGonagall shouted over the cacophony. "We began the practical portion of this section too soon." She took out her wand, and with one sweep vanished the dead and dying bird parts. "For the rest of class, we will be reviewing fundamentals. What is conjuration? What is summoning? What, for that matter, is a bird? What sorts of birds can and cannot be conjured?"

Professor McGonagall walked to her desk, levitating a piece of chalk to begin writing on the board. "One thing stood out to me today, something fairly rudimentary that interfered with casting the spell. Has anyone else noticed?"

Harry looked around the room to see if anyone would answer. Resigned, he raised his own hand.

“Mr. Evans,” Professor McGonagall said, looking unsurprised and rather annoyed by the inattentiveness of her students.

Harry lowered his hand. “You can’t conjure magical creatures using this spell.”

“Interesting qualification,” she said. “But you are correct. Those of you who grew up in magical households are consistently attempting to conjure magical birds! Mr. Weasley,” she said. George jerked upright. “What sort of chickens does your mother raise?”

George’s eyes dawned with comprehension. “Fire-breathing chickens.”

“Do you think those are mundane creatures, Weasley?”

“No,” George said. “So I’ve got to try conjuring a muggle chicken?”

“Preferably any bird that does not breathe fire,” Professor McGonagall said wryly. “Miss Urquhart, what bird did you first attempt to conjure?”

Astrid scowled. “A golden snidget.”

“Not only a magical bird, but one that is nearly extinct,” Professor McGonagall said. “You were much more successful with the sparrows.”

Astrid gritted her teeth, then nodded.

Professor McGonagall looked back at Harry. “Why can we not use the Bird Summoning spell to conjure magical birds?” The chalk aggressively clacked against the blackboard.

“Gamp’s Law,” Harry said.

“Five points for Slytherin,” she said, giving him a faint smile. The piece of chalk underlined the term several times. “Generally stated, one cannot transfigure anything of magical significance! This was introduced to you in your first year. You are now N.E.W.T. students, and I cannot fathom why you continuously neglect to factor Gamp’s Law into your spellwork!”

Harry knew she wasn’t addressing him, but it was still grating to hear.

Professor McGonagall looked around the room, her eyes settling on Cedric Diggory. Harry had never been in Transfiguration or Potions class with Cedric, but Cedric had done well enough on his O.W.L.s to proceed to the N.E.W.T. classes in both. Transfiguration was his best subject, after all. Harry did his best to ignore him, and Cedric’s friends, and how he had been unwittingly used to enter Harry in a tournament he had not wished to enter.

“Mr. Diggory,” Professor McGonagall asked. “Can you conjure an owl?”

“Right now?” Cedric asked, smiling rakishly. He got a few laughs, but Harry and Astrid were both stubbornly silent. “No, professor, all owls have magic. It would put owl breeders out of business if we could, according to my dad.”

“You are correct, Mr. Diggory,” Professor McGonagall said. “Five points for Hufflepuff.” She glanced at the hourglass draining away in one corner. “I want you all to get out your reading for this week, Morganach’s *Mu dheidhinn cruthachadh eòin ann am draoidheil*, from the 1293 issue of *Transfiguration Times*. For the remainder of class, we will be comparing the original Gaelic to the modern English translation. I can assure you some nuance is lost—”

A knock at the door interrupted Professor McGonagall’s instructions. She closed her eyes, looking very put upon. The door opened, admitting a mousey-haired boy who was vibrating with glee.

Colin Creevey walked right up to Professor McGonagall’s desk.

“What is it, Creevey?” McGonagall asked, looking down at the bouncing third-year. Harry only recognized him as one of his brother’s stalkers.

“I’m supposed to take Harry Evans upstairs, miss,” Colin said.

“Whatever for?” Professor McGonagall asked. “Surely it can wait until after class.”

Harry began putting his things away.

“Mr. Bagman wants him,” Colin explained. “They’ve got a photographer and everything!”

“That explains why he’s so excited,” Harry said, checking his desk to make sure he had got everything.

Astrid gave him a questioning look.

“It’s the Wand Weighing ceremony,” Harry explained.

George leaned over to whisper, “Bagman wants to weigh your wand?”

“Laugh it up,” Harry said, slinging his bag across his shoulder. “Remind me, how much did you get for Bagman handling *your* wand?”

George’s expression darkened. “How did you know about... It was Percy, wasn’t it?”

Harry smirked at him, then looked over to where Colin was still arguing with Professor McGonagall.

“Oh, very well!” she burst out. “Evans, this week’s essay is due Tuesday next.”

“Yes, professor,” Harry said. He ignored the feeling of everyone’s eyes following him as he left the room, relieved when the door shut behind him.

Harry looked down at Colin, who looked back with starstruck eyes. Harry was reminded of how Colin had been petrified by the basilisk. Had being in different houses saved Harry from Colin’s hero worship?

Colin kept staring at him.

“Which room are they in?” Harry gently prompted.

Colin leapt as if stung. “Yes, sir, Captain Evans! This way, sir!”

Suppressing a sigh, Harry crossed his arms and followed Colin as he careened through the castle.

Monty stared at the badge on Draco Malfoy's robes, feeling slightly vexed. There was no way Harry hadn't known about them. He couldn't have given a warning? A wall of Slytherins wore the badge, lighting the corridor with their glowing rainbow message.

EVANS RULES

A little grey cat walked through the background of the words, batting at the letters and making them shake. It was adorable.

“Should I make badges too?” Neville asked nervously. “I didn't know I was meant to do that.”

“Don't worry, Longbottom,” Malfoy said, his eyes shining mischievously. “I've got that covered. Watch this!”

Malfoy pressed his badge, and *EVANS RULES* vanished. In its place, in a dismal blue, read the words

POTTER DROOLS

All of the Slytherins followed suit, laughing at their cleverness, with Tracey Davis adding her two pence; she flipped him off again.

Monty waited for something else to happen, and was pleased to see the letters started dripping like actual drool.

“Cool,” Monty said, at the same time Hermione said, “Oh, very funny!”

Malfoy smirked, pulling another badge from his robes to hand to her. “You want one too, Granger? Shouldn't you mudbloods stick together?”

Before anyone could react, the door to the Potions classroom creaked open. The corridor went dead silent as Professor Snape stepped out.

“Care to repeat that, Mr. Malfoy?” Snape asked.

“No, sir,” Malfoy said quickly, frozen like a deer in headlights.

“How many times must we have this same conversation?” Snape continued, stepping forward. He held out his hand.

Malfoy stared at it.

“The badge, Malfoy.”

“Yes, sir,” Malfoy said, placing it carefully in Snape's hand.

“Twenty points from Slytherin,” Snape said, walking back into the classroom. “For poor taste.”

Monty silently followed his classmates into the potions lab, taking a table up front with Neville. He looked back at Hermione to see if she was alright, but she was sitting next to Ron and busy setting up her station. Ron had gone bright red, and was staring daggers at Malfoy.

“Antidotes,” Snape said, turning to confront them. “There are many common household potions which are toxic for humans to ingest. Pesticides, cleaning potions, and so on. Some of you may have imbibed such potions in your infancy.”

Snape looked pointedly at Neville. Neville gulped.

“Today you will be brewing an antidote to one such potion,” Snape said, picking up a jar filled with a clear liquid. “Who can identify this?”

No one raised their hand.

“Davis?”

Tracey Davis made a face of intense concentration. “It looks like water, professor.”

“Yet it is not,” Snape said. “Use your admittedly meager powers of deduction. I have told you it is common in the household.”

Monty raised his hand.

“Potter?” Snape said, turning his piercing gaze onto Monty.

“It smells familiar,” he said, lowering his hand. “I think I've seen Hagrid use it before, but it was in a can. Is it flesh-eating slug repellent?”

Snape watched him for a moment, then sighed. “Correct, Potter. Five points for Gryffindor.”

Neville gasped, then slapped a hand over his mouth.

“This potion is designed to act on flesh-eating slugs,” Snape said, levitating the jar for them all to see, “but also has a deleterious effect on anyone who drinks it. Your organs begin to melt.”

“The cans have got a warning on them,” Neville said shakily.

“A warning that is only effective if one is literate, Longbottom,” Snape said, grabbing the jar out of the air. “You have approximately one hour before this potion completely eats through you. It works much more quickly on slugs.”

Snape gave the jar an unhappy look, sighed, then drank the entire thing.

“No!” Hermione yelled, as others screamed and shouted in warning.

“Professor!”

“Why did you do that?”

”Are you insane?”

Monty stared in numb shock, panic surging through him.

Snape made a face, then set the jar back down. ”You have an hour to create the antidote. Begin.”

Monty lunged for his bag, struggling to find his books. Frustrated, he got out his wand. ”*Accio!*” He caught the book, relieved the Summoning Charm had worked. Flitwick had started teaching it right after the champion selection, and Monty had taken longer than usual to master it.

“Neville,” he said, turning to his shaking friend. “What are the ingredients in flesh-eating slug repellent?”

“I...”

“Write them down,” Monty said, shoving a quill into Neville's hand. “You know what they are. I know Professor Sprout has some. I'm going to double check it against the recipe. We don't know if Professor Snape got it from her, or if he made it himself.”

“It is my own brew,” Snape said, walking past their table. The lab was in the most focused state of chaos Monty had ever seen. Even if he didn't like Snape, Monty didn't want him to die. Tracey Davis was barking orders at Vincent Crabbe, and he bulldozed his way to the ingredients cabinet. “I will be taking one of your antidotes at the end of the hour. Just one. I shudder to think what would happen if I combined them. Finnigan, that scale is not balanced.”

“Done,” Neville said, passing the list to Monty.

Monty summoned another book to himself, and began writing down counter ingredients. “Put the cauldron on, we need to preheat it.”

Monty was so caught up in making the antidote that he didn't hear the knock on the door, or notice Colin Creevey marching right up to Snape's desk.

“What is it, Creevey?” Snape asked.

“I’m supposed to take Monty Potter upstairs, sir!”

“Why?” Monty asked, not looking up from the dried worrywort he was crushing.

“Mr. Bagman wants all the champions there,” Colin explained. “I think they’re taking photographs.”

Monty felt his face heat up.

“Get. Out.”

Monty looked away from his mortar and pestle and saw Snape glaring at Colin.

“But, sir!” Colin squeaked.

“Creevey,” he snapped, taking out his watch again. “Every second you waste of my time is a point from Gryffindor. I am not asking you, I am *telling* you to get out of my classroom. Now.”

Colin hesitated, then spun around and sprinted from the room.

“Incredible,” Snape said, waving his hand to shut the door. He looked around the room, narrowing his eyes when he caught Monty gawking at him. “Get back to work.”

Harry watched as Colin ran to the dungeons to fetch Monty, then let himself into the room he had been led to. He almost turned back around.

It was one of the smaller classrooms, and instead of removing the desks they had been pushed the furniture to one side. Several desks were covered in black velvet. Behind these were five chairs, one occupied by Ludo Bagman, who was chatting to a middle-aged witch in magenta robes. Harry recognized her on sight.

Rita Skeeter.

Harry knew the Weighing of the Wands would be featured in the *Daily Prophet*—Percy had told him as much in a recent letter—and was disappointed he hadn't anticipated Skeeter doing the coverage. Since the Triwizard Tournament involved students, Harry had hoped they would send someone nicer.

Bagman smiled at him, but didn't stop his conversation with Skeeter. There was a creepy man lurking in one corner, holding a smoking camera and staring at Fleur. Fleur was flinging her hair around like a horse trying to beat away flies, so Harry was not certain how she felt about the man ogling her. Astrid would have punched him.

Viktor was sulking in a corner, but he perked up when he saw Harry. Given the options, Harry walked over to him.

"I haven't seen any of you around the castle," Harry said by way of greeting. "Are you all staying on the ship?"

"Yes," Viktor said. "Professor Karkaroff was not happy with the champion selection. Many of us would have liked to explore Hogwarts, and share meals."

"Hopefully he gets his head out of his arse," Harry said, drawing a gruff laugh from Viktor. "If he thinks a fourth-year is a challenge for any of his students, I would question the quality of education at Durmstrang."

Harry looked around for a place to put his bag, realized he didn't want Skeeter or the creepy photographer to paw through his things, and decided to keep it on. He wished he had gone with Colin to the dungeons and dropped his things off.

They stood around silently for a few minutes, waiting for the ceremony to actually start.

"Are you looking forward to the first task?" Viktor asked.

"To it being over, maybe," Harry said, just as the door opened again.

Bagman stood up, his smile broadening. "Ah, there he is..."

Colin Creevey stumbled in, his face red, his eyes wild. He sniffed wetly, then said, "Professor Snape won't let Monty leave class!"

Bagman's smile faltered, while Rita Skeeter's face did something interesting. Harry decided she was almost as creepy as her photographer.

"We can't have the ceremony without all of the champions here, Barty would have kneazles! Dumbledore's still in his office with our expert..."

Harry watched as Bagman talked to himself, wishing he had also stayed in class. Colin Creevey fidgeted by the door, not knowing what to do with himself.

"Can't you go ask him again?" Bagman said to Colin.

Colin paled, then leapt aside as the door opened.

"Good afternoon," Professor Dumbledore said, stepping into the small room. Behind him was Mr. Ollivander, the wandmaker. "It seems we are missing a few people."

"This boy says Snape won't let Monty Potter out of class," Bagman said, waving at Colin.

Dumbledore glanced at Colin, smiling kindly. "Colin, you may return to class. You've done very well, and I thank you."

"Thank you, sir!" Colin said, fleeing the room.

"Now, we *do* need Monty here," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "I could speak to Severus myself, though I suspect I would receive just as warm a reception as Mr. Creevey. Harry, could you retrieve Monty?"

Startled at hearing his given name, Harry automatically replied, "Yes, professor."

"Harry is one of Professor Snape's best students," Dumbledore explained as Harry left the room. He quietly shut the door behind himself, then took the long way to the dungeons. Monty's class wouldn't end for another fifty minutes. They could wait.

Monty willed his hands not to shake as he decanted the antidote. He could not let any of the sediment get in. Neville hovered nearby, breathing heavily. Professor Snape had sat down halfway through the class, which they all knew was a bad sign. He never sat.

"I see you are all finished," Snape said, narrowing his eyes. "Given my deteriorated vision, I hope this is not a figment of my imagination. Let's see..." he looked around the room, his eyes focusing on something behind Monty. "Weasley, bring me your antidote. Unless Granger did the work for you?"

"I—" Ron started.

Professor Snape closed his eyes. "At least I know it will accelerate my imminent demise."

Before Ron could move, there was a knock on the door.

"Pardon me, sir," Harry said, looking into the room. "Professor Dumbledore sent me."

"Potter," Snape said, standing up. "I shall test your antidote. Let us discover if the *champion* is capable of brewing something so basic."

Aware that Harry was watching, Monty carried his antidote to Professor Snape. Snape held the vial up for examination, frowned slightly, then drank the antidote.

The class held its breath, waiting for his verdict.

"Hmm."

"Well?" Seamus demanded. "Did it work?"

"Are you going to live, professor?" Pansy Parkinson asked.

“I bet Potter poisoned him more!” Malfoy accused.

“It was an adequate attempt,” Snape said, startling everyone. “Potter, collect your belongings and leave. The rest of you will begin an analysis of your antidote. This includes you, Longbottom.”

Monty quickly gathered his things and hurried to the door, trusting Neville would clean up their table. Harry held the door open wider to let him pass, then shut it quietly behind them. They walked through the dungeons without speaking.

“I can’t believe he’s still doing fake poisonings,” Harry said once they reached the entrance hall.

“It was fake?” Monty said, aghast.

Harry turned to grin at him. “Do you think Professor Snape would trust a student’s antidote?”

“What a git,” Monty said, forgetting that Harry was one of Snape’s favorite students. Thankfully, Harry softly laughed.

“Yeah, he can be,” Harry agreed, leading him up a staircase.

“Do I really have to do this?” Monty asked.

Harry slowed down so they were walking side by side. Monty felt his ears pop.

“Did you cast a silencing charm?” he asked.

“I did,” Harry said. “And yes, you have to do this. They want to put a good face on there being four champions. It helps that you’re already famous.” He sighed. “I don’t want to do this either, and I *really* don’t want my picture in the *Daily Prophet*.”

Monty nodded to himself. “You aren’t wearing a badge.”

“What?” Harry asked, looking down at his prefect and captain badges.

“The ones Malfoy made,” Monty clarified.

“Oh, those,” Harry said, reaching into his robes. He pulled out an *EVANS RULES* badge strobing with rainbow lights. “You can have it if you want. I came up with the slogan.”

“Thanks,” Monty said, taking the badge. Maybe they wouldn’t publish a picture with him wearing it.

Harry stopped near an alcove and motioned for Monty to join him.

“Rita Skeeter’s in there,” Harry said in a low voice. “Have you heard of her?”

“She sounds familiar,” Monty said. “Hold on, didn’t she write all those articles about the World Cup?”

“She did,” Harry confirmed. “She likes picking targets. You’re the Boy Who Lived. That’s front page material.”

Monty scowled. “So don’t talk to her?”

“I don’t think she should even be allowed past the gate,” Harry said darkly. “But yeah, don’t talk to her. If she tries to corner you, you’ve got a card up your sleeve.”

Monty gave him a puzzled look. “What do you mean?”

Monty waited for Harry to go in first.

“Finally!” someone burst out. “We have been waiting for over an hour!”

Monty snuck in behind Harry, freezing when he saw the headmaster watching him. Professor Dumbledore smiled. Monty glanced at Harry, who waited indifferently for the complaints to die down. It was mostly Karkaroff, Maxime, and Delacour. Krum simply glowered.

“Thank you, Harry,” Professor Dumbledore said. “Shall we begin?”

Ludo Bagman smiled good naturedly. “We are here for the Wand Weighing ceremony. This is Rita Skeeter,” he said, gesturing to a woman in the corner who was sucking on an acid green quill. She wore garish magenta robes, jeweled spectacles, and had a spray of blonde curls in suspiciously uniform spirals. “She will be writing a small piece in the *Daily Prophet*.”

Rita Skeeter was staring at him. She had been staring at Monty since he first entered the room. “Not that small, Ludo! I was hoping to have a word with Monty before we got started.”

“I’m afraid we do not have time for that, Rita,” Dumbledore said. “Monty, if you could have a seat.”

Monty saw a row of chairs next to the door, where the other three champions were already sitting. Harry left the spot at the end free for him.

“Excellent,” Dumbledore said. “Now, I would like to introduce you to Mr. Ollivander. He will be examining your wands to ensure they are in good condition.”

With a start, Monty noticed Ollivander standing next to a window. At the sound of his name, the old wandmaker walked to the center of the room.

Monty had never thought about what wands other people had, and was surprised that veela hair could be used as a wand core. Not only did Delacour’s wand have one, but it was her own grandmother’s hair. After examining her wand, Ollivander had it produce a bouquet.

Krum had got his wand made by another wandmaker, and Ollivander wasn't a fan of the style. Monty honestly could not tell the difference. It looked like a stick, like every other wand did. He also wasn't very interested in their wands, so perhaps the details were lost on him.

"Ah, Mr. Evans," Ollivander said, taking Harry's wand. "One of mine. I'm glad to see you've been taking care of it. Do you still remember what I told you?"

"I do," Harry said in his quiet voice. "How could I forget?"

Ollivander gave Harry a searching look, then returned to examining his wand. "Pine and phoenix feather, eleven inches, more flexible than I recall."

Monty gripped his seat, trying not to react. Harry's wand was nearly identical to his.

"She only gave me the one feather, you know?" Ollivander said, twirling the wand slightly. Several black sparks shot out of it, falling onto the floor to fade away.

Harry smiled slightly. "I know."

"*Avis!*" Ollivander said.

A small, drab bird wriggled out of Harry's wand, escaping through the open window. Ollivander frowned at it, then silently returned Harry's wand. Harry hid his wand somewhere in his robes, then sat back down.

"Which leaves you, Mr. Potter," Ollivander said, his eyes gleaming.

Monty reluctantly stood, then gave his wand to the oddly excited wandmaker. He hoped Ollivander didn't go on about how he and Voldemort had feathers from the same bird. Luckily, the old man just stared admiringly at his own creation.

"How well I remember," Ollivander said softly, turning Monty's wand every which way. "Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple..."

Monty resisted the urge to look back at Harry, expecting the older boy to be just as surprised by the similarity. He thought it was more significant than whatever connection his wand had to Voldemort's.

When Ollivander gave Monty his wand back, he hurried to his seat. He was glad it was finally over.

"Photographs!" Bagman cried. "We need to take photos, Dumbledore!"

"For fuck's sake," Harry said under his breath.

Monty bit his cheek so he wouldn't laugh. He didn't think it was that bad, not with Harry around.

Behind the Scar

Chapter Summary

November 1994

The library had become an inhospitable environment. The Durmstrang students had been allowed off the ship, and now Krum was stalking the bookshelves, followed by giggling fans. Monty had no idea what he was doing, and didn't care. Harry, he knew, sought refuge in the Restricted Section. Monty was determined to get a pass himself, or sneak in under his cloak, but he didn't want to abandon Neville and Luna.

Ron's cousin Mafalda had snuck up to their table, left a note, and ran away. Monty was glad it wasn't fan mail, or a note asking for an autograph, but couldn't wrap his head around why she was giving him the Slytherin gobstones team practice schedule, and which evenings Harry had his prefect duties. He doubted Harry would have used Mafalda as a messenger to arrange a meeting. They already met in the Room of Requirement every night.

Puzzled, Monty put the note in his pocket. He'd have to ask Harry about it. Once Mafalda had scampered away, and Krum had wandered off to haunt another section of the library, Monty turned back to his work.

Goshawk's Guide to Herbology was a good compendium, and one Professor Sprout frequently made reference to. However, given the breadth of the topics it covered, nothing was gone into in great detail.

"I don't think it would work, Monty," Neville said quietly, averse to speaking at a normal volume and bringing down Madam Pince's wrath.

"Something's got to make them bounce," Monty said, frowning at the picture of the plant in question. Some of the flying seahorses were having issues with their flight bladders, which sometimes would underinflate. It made flight difficult for the little creatures. Professor Grubbly-Plank was rehabilitating a few of them, and Monty wanted to help.

"What about those anti-gravity trees in Nepal?" Monty asked. "No, that's different from flying on your own."

"It could be something in their environment," Neville said, moving books around. He passed one to Monty. *Magical Water Plants of the Highland Lochs*.

"Maybe," Monty said, paging through the book. "I don't think a water plant will help with a flying problem. Bouncing bulbs inflate, there's got to be something there."

He sat back in his seat, almost wishing he had picked a less ambitious project for Herbology. Neville's was more straightforward. He was researching how different fertilizers affected how bouncy a bouncing bulb was. There was plenty enough abraxan manure for it.

"You could ask Professor Snape about it," Neville said, a suggestion that would have been unthinkable in first year. "He uses the flying seahorses in potions, so it's important to him too."

Monty tried to imagine himself asking Snape for help. What if he thought Monty's idea was stupid? Snape hated stupid questions.

"You should ask him, Fleamont," Luna said, watching him with luminous eyes. "Professor Snape would help you."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Okay, yeah. I could go after dinner."

Luna smiled, then went back to her Ancient Runes homework.

Feeling anxious about this tentative plan, Monty began putting his notes into some coherent order. The flying seahorses needed help regulating the inflation of their flight bladders. He grabbed his copy of *Aquatic Wonders of Yorkshire*, needing more details on flying seahorse physiology. How could a potion be administered to them? They were so small, so getting them to drink something would be difficult. Maybe something aerosolized? Smoke, mist...

Monty was so focused on compiling something that wouldn't make him sound like a total idiot that he didn't notice Hermione's approach. A pile of books slammed onto the table, and Monty jumped, nearly upsetting his pot of ink.

"Hermione, what the hell?" Monty said, giving her a hard look.

"What are you doing?" Hermione demanded, glaring imperiously down at him. "There's barely a week until the first task, and you haven't been preparing at all!"

"So *now* you care?" Monty asked. "And who says I haven't been preparing?"

"I've always cared," she said, sorting through the books she had brought. "I've been looking up all sorts of spells that could help."

"Is that what you've been doing?" Monty said. "I thought you'd been babysitting Ron."

"He doesn't think you put your name in," Hermione said, sitting down uninvited. "Not after what the headmaster said."

"Hermione, that was weeks ago," Monty said, glancing at Neville. Neville shrugged, then picked up a book to hide behind. "Or is he still jealous?"

"He's not *jealous*," Hermione said, which sounded like a lie. "He's embarrassed."

"That's a shame," Monty said, dipping his quill. "I'm not interested."

Hermione was silent for a moment. Monty looked up to see if she had left, but she was still in her seat. She was looking at Luna's homework.

"That's wrong, you know," Hermione said.

Luna ignored her.

"You've written that wrong," Hermione repeated, leaning forward to point at Luna's parchment. Luna pulled it away.

"Hermione, leave it," Monty said. "It's Luna's homework, she can do what she wants with it."

"But she's put *mannaz* when it should be *ehwaz*," Hermione said insistently.

"She doesn't want your help," Monty said, glancing at Luna. Luna was smiling to herself, adding floral details to the border of her assignment.

Hermione huffed. "Professor Babbling is going to mark it down."

Luna stopped drawing, turning to stare at Hermione. Hermione pulled back, looking unnerved.

"Daddy writes a column in Elder Futhark," Luna said. "I've been reading it my entire life."

"There you go," Monty said. "She's fluent. Now can you leave her alone?"

Hermione's lip trembled, but she nodded and turned back to Monty. "Honestly, you should make up with Ron. I know you miss each other."

Monty sighed, setting down his quill again. "I've told him, and I'll tell you. I don't have time to deal with his jealousy, or embarrassment, or whatever he's feeling. I've got bigger plimpies to catch."

Hermione gave him a baffled look, shook her head, then began unstacking the books she had brought over. Monty scanned the titles, noting that all involved defensive spells.

"I just think it would be better if we could all get along," Hermione said. "I *really* think you need all the help you can get, Monty. This tournament is serious. People have died!"

Monty pushed his glasses up, rubbing his eyes. "Exactly. It's great you can see things from both sides, but you're acting like everything's the same. Like Ron being jealous of me is as important as me having to be in this tournament. It's *not* the same. Ron can live through his jealousy. I might not live through the first task." He looked up at her again, his expression hardening. "His feelings are not more important than my life."

Hermione's eyes darted around. "That's not what I meant."

"That's how you've been acting," Monty said heatedly, not pleased at having this conversation, irritated that it was happening in the library, and in front of Luna and Neville.

“Have you considered what I’m going through? Has Ron? Does he think it’s a lark having dead parents and a scar people stare at constantly? Why do you think it’s okay to keep pressuring me about him? How about this, Ron can polyjuice as me and he can see how fun it is going up against—”

Monty bit his tongue, scowling.

“Against what?” Hermione asked.

“Nothing,” Monty said. “Absolutely nothing. But I can tell you,” he added, gesturing to the books she had brought, “none of *that* will help me. I appreciate the thought, but I don’t need your help, and I don’t want it. At least, not right now,” he amended.

“Fine,” Hermione said, swallowing. She began stacking up the books again.

“You can stay if you want,” Monty offered. “You don’t have to sit by yourself.”

“No, it’s alright,” Hermione said quickly, lifting the pile of books. “I’ve got...” She bit her lip, hesitated, then spun around, disappearing into the stacks.

Monty sighed, then looked down at the table. He could hear Neville turning a page, the scratch of Luna’s quill. After a moment, Monty picked up his own quill again and got back to work.

“What’s wrong with your face?”

Harry smoothed out his expression.

“That’s worse,” Phoebe said.

“It’s that book he’s been reading,” Astrid said, reaching over to grab it

Harry pulled the book away, shoving it back into his robes. “What book?”

“That’s what I want to know!” Phoebe said. “Is it something Adrian gave you?”

“What?” Adrian shouted from down the Slytherin table. He was playing Exploding Snap with Terence and some second-years, and his hand of cards exploded in his face.

“Nothing,” Harry said. “No one said your name.”

“What?”

“He can’t hear,” Harry explained to Phoebe and Astrid. “All the explosions. He’s got tinnitus.”

“Right,” Astrid said, narrowing her eyes.

Dinner began appearing on the table, and Harry soon busied himself with eating and not acting suspicious.

Men Who Love Dragons Too Much was very instructive. The men *really* loved dragons. Only the most powerful spells could penetrate the ancient magic that protected their thick hides. Harry had never known a dragon harness could be used like *that*.

Dinner was interrupted halfway through by the arrival of owls. A lot of owls. Harry kept his breathing even, reaching into his robes to pull out two sickles. The *Daily Prophet* post owls were stingy when it came to special editions.

“What do you think happened?” Terence asked, watching as the owls landed among the older students and professors. Cassius paid for his own copy, looking at Harry before he opened it.

Harry waited until the owl had flown off, taking a slice of roast with her, then unrolled his copy of the *Evening Prophet*.

BEHIND THE SCAR

From Boy-Who-Lived to Teenager-Who-Triumphed

Inside the Fascinating Mind of Monty Potter, Hogwarts Champion

“I knew that was a Quick-Quotes Quill,” Harry muttered to himself, staring at the huge picture of his little brother taking up the front page. His brother’s picture was not being cooperative and kept trying to back out of the frame, before being pushed back in by someone with long, sharp nails. Picture-Monty crossed his arms and stared challengingly into the camera.

Harry had to suppress a smile. His brother was mimicking him.

As much as the picture itself amused Harry, the article did not. He wasn’t at all surprised that Skeeter had made the first article about the Triwizard champions entirely about Monty Potter. The Boy Who Lived sold papers. People would frame the issue. They’d be talking about it for weeks, months even. Moreover, the only published picture of Monty had been from when he was a baby. This was the first time people were seeing what he looked like as a teenager.

The magical British community had got enough of Krum during the Quidditch World Cup, no one would care about an unknown girl from Beauxbatons, and Harry was a nobody.

“What’s this shit?” Astrid said, looking over his shoulder.

“Let me read it,” Harry said, keeping his face neutral. He stopped himself from looking at the Gryffindor table. He already knew Monty would hate the article.

A large portion of the article was dedicated to an exaggerated retelling of Monty’s life story, what little Skeeter had uncovered of it. Surviving the Killing Curse, his famous scar, living with muggle relatives. Harry clenched his jaw, wishing Monty had been less free with that information. It wasn’t a stretch to work out which side of the family the *muggle relatives* came from, and it would be easy for anyone passingly familiar with the muggle world to track them down. Or simply ask someone in Gryffindor, given how many of Monty’s house mates were happy to share information about him with Skeeter.

It was a surprisingly long article, given Skeeter had not managed to interview his brother.

Monty was sadly unavailable for comment. As a dedicated student, at the top of his class, Monty will not let the ‘malfunction’ that entered him into the tournament affect his studies. Indeed, when this reporter visited Hogwarts, our meeting was delayed as Monty raced against time to brew an antidote for a poisoned professor.

‘Monty’s been hard at work getting ready for the first task. We all believe in him. He defeated You-Know-Who!’ says Colin Creevey, a close friend of Monty’s.

Harry closed his eyes in annoyance. That explained the number of pictures of Monty playing quidditch, in the Great Hall, even in the Gryffindor common room. He hoped Colin had got paid for it. He wished Colin had *asked* Monty first, but knew he hadn’t.

The article got worse from there.

Colin also shares that Monty has found love at Hogwarts! Following a rogue troll attack in his first year, Monty has rarely been seen out of the company of one Hermione Granger. A stunningly pretty muggleborn girl, Hermione has traded top spots with Monty in all of their classes.

‘It’s how they flirt,’ says classmate Lavender Brown. ‘They’ve even fought about it before, that’s why she stopped taking Divination.’

“Do they mention you at all?” Astrid asked angrily, scowling at a picture from their first quidditch game of the year. Monty was laid flat on his Firebolt, his father’s goggles turning his expression more grim, reaching desperately for the snitch.

Harry skipped to the last line.

The Durmstrang champion is Hector Crumb, and the Beauxbatons champion is Floor Della Core.

He silently passed the paper to Astrid then took a bracing sip of tea, desperately trying not to laugh.

After dinner, and the commotion Skeeter's article had caused and which would no doubt permeate the school by the next morning, Severus retreated to his office under the pretense of marking. It was a lie, as he had already finished tearing apart his student's mediocre essays. It was one of the few highlights of his job.

He did, however, have several projects underway. It was the full moon, and Lupin required his last dose of Wolfsbane. The skrewts had tripled in size, and his progress was frustrated there. Anything Severus did to them seemed only to empower the skrewts. The ones in the Forbidden Forest had killed each other off until the population was reduced to a mere twenty specimens, each stronger than anyone had anticipated. And then there was finishing the potion for the Weasley boy. Acquiring a nogtail was no easy task, but a nogtail hunter in Yorkshire had been found, and was willing to part with the creature's organs.

Severus would have told the boy to go to St. Mungo's, but Pomfrey had been invested after overseeing his health for years. And he knew Harry was fond of that particular Weasley. Severus had rarely worked with nogtail, so the brewing itself was a novel experience. It was a break from teaching the same potions, brewing the same stock for the infirmary, year after year.

His copy of the *Evening Prophet* was spread out on his desk. The cover photograph of Monty Potter was trying to get something out of his robes, something which looked suspiciously like a glowing badge, but someone outside of the frame grabbed his shoulders and made him face the camera. Potter scowled, which gave Severus a frisson of unease. At a glance, Potter looked remarkably similar to his father, but anyone who knew Lily, anyone who remembered her, could see the resemblance. A resemblance his own son bore.

The article was thus both a relief and frustrating. Harry had not been mentioned at all, being of no interest to the author. He was Slytherin, which was generally maligned. He presented himself as a muggleborn, with no family of note. Why would the readers be interested in a boy they had never heard of before, when the Boy Who Lived would be competing? Not even the quidditch player, Krum, had warranted more than a passing mention.

On the other hand, his son was being overlooked. That Harry was being excluded, being dismissed as unimportant, infuriated Severus.

He took control of his emotions, dousing the rising conflagration of his outrage.

There was a knock at the door.

“Sorry for interrupting, professor,” Monty Potter said, sticking his head in. “Can I ask you a question?”

“You did, Potter,” Severus said, glaring at the boy.

Potter grimaced. “Another one?”

“Just come in, Potter,” Severus said, shoving the *Evening Prophet* into a drawer. “I assume you are not here to boast about saving my life.”

Potter looked at him crossly. “If that was really poison you drank, I bet you had the antidote with you, or a bezoar. Sir.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps. What did you wish to speak with me about, Potter?”

Potter approached his desk, reaching into his bag. “I have a project in Herbology, only it’s turning into more of a Potions project,” he said. He pulled out a piece of parchment, looking uncertain of what to do with it.

“Let me see,” Severus said, summoning the parchment from his hands. Potter gave him a petulant look, but said nothing. Severus scanned the parchment, growing more interested as he read. The boy wanted to create a potion to cure a flying seahorse ailment. He had identified several potential ingredients, and methods of administering the potion. He’d even thought of how to dose such small, fragile creatures. Despite himself, Severus was impressed by how much thought Potter had put into it.

He looked up at the boy, who was standing stiffly in front of his desk. Potter must have read the article too, and could have anticipated what Severus’ reaction would have been. The Slytherins weren’t shy about expressing their hatred for the Boy Who Lived. Harry depended on it, was even encouraging it, to further distance himself from a boy he had rarely interacted with in public.

“You are interested in Potions,” Severus said.

Potter scrunched up his face, then nodded. “I know my mum was good at potions,” he said, “and my grandfather. Who I’m named after.”

“I know who he is,” Severus said, drawing a startled look from the boy. “The Potters were prominent potioners for centuries.” He looked at the boy’s notes again. “You wish for my feedback on this?”

“Someone suggested I ask you,” Potter said. “Since, you know, you’re our teacher.”

Severus leaned back, a plan forming. He looked at the smoking goblet on his desk. “Are you aware of Lupin’s condition?”

“You mean that he’s a werewolf?” Potter asked.

Severus sighed. At what age did children stop blurting things out? “Yes. I prepare his Wolfsbane potion. If you agree to take it to Lupin for the week preceding the full moon, for the remainder of the year, I will assist you in this matter.”

“That’s it?” Potter asked, perking up. “I mean, yeah, I can do that. Professor.”

Severus pointed to the goblet of Wolfsbane on his desk. “Lupin should be in his office. Take it, and wait until he consumes the entire dosage.”

“Yes, sir,” Potter said, hurrying forward. He carefully picked up the goblet and left the room without a backwards glance.

Pleased he had solved one of his problems, Severus took out a quill and began correcting Potter’s notes.

Going to Hogsmeade

Chapter Summary

November 1994, three days until the First Task

Chapter Notes

I have had a bad day, the kind of day where everything that could possibly go wrong does. But I still got to write, and go to read all of your comments, which has made it better :)

And, as I wrote this note, one of my cats threw up on my bed. Yay.

Hilariously, as I was cleaning that up, I remembered I'd put the kettle on the stove. Two hours ago.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lady Madeleine flattened her body, her claws sinking into Harry's robes, as his brother blurred past them, the swooping evil hot on his trail. Harry ducked his head, his robes and hair tossed about by the Firebolt's slipstream. The swooping evil let out a wretched cry, and Harry gripped the letter he was holding so it would not be ripped from his hands.

"Why are we doing this again?" Monty shouted, diving to avoid another stream of acid spat out by the giant toy.

"Contingencies," Harry said. His reply was drowned out by the shriek Monty's occamy gave as she joined the fray. Smiling to himself, Harry went back to reading the letter.

I will be staying in Hogsmeade to assist in the final arrangements for the First Task. I agree it would be unwise for us to meet in public, and am amenable to the alternative you have suggested...

"Hester, look out!"

Harry turned to see the occamy, who had grown to three feet, on a collision course with his brother. She shrank immediately, banked her wings, then attached herself to Monty's robes. Monty had to do a barrel roll to avoid getting a bite from the swooping evil, then shot off again.

“Are dragons really this fast?” Monty demanded as he did another fly by. Harry was glad the Room of Requirement was flexible with its size. They were in a vast chamber, nearly twice the size of the Great Hall, with plenty of room for flying. And for an even larger stuffed swooping evil.

“Some are faster,” Harry said, taking out his wand. “Thanks for reminding me.”

“What?” Monty shouted, as the swooping evil doubled in speed. His occamy hissed something incomprehensible, but it was clear she was having the time of her life. The Firebolt was incredibly fast, outpacing almost every creature, but a human maneuvering at its top speed, even a prodigy like Monty, could not compare to a creature naturally possessed of the ability.

Harry put the letter from Percy away to focus on his brother. He glanced at the gargantuan chalkboard he had stuck on the wall, and the complex chart he had created detailing every scenario he could envision. Knowing the First Task involved a dragon, but not what the First Task actually was, left a lot of room for interpretation. As Monty screamed past, coated in fluorescent pink goo, Harry wondered if his myriad plans were perhaps *too* complex.

“*Protego maxima!*”

The swooping evil hit the shield in a blinding flash of light, smooshing against it. It gave a sad little wheeze, then fell to the floor.

Monty landed next to him, his robes squelching and dripping goo. He gave Harry a pointed look, and Harry obligingly vanished the mess.

“If you played gobstones, you wouldn’t even notice it,” Harry said, putting his wand away.

Monty dismounted his Firebolt, wobbled a bit, then sank to the floor. Hester peeked her plumed head out of Monty’s robes, her tongue flicking out to taste the air.

“*You can keep flying,*” Monty hissed, pulling her out and tossing her into the air. Hester immediately began increasing in size, reaching her current maximum of three feet, though her wingspan was nearly ten feet.

“She gets annoyed when I don’t talk to her,” Monty said, leaning back on his hands. “I was already worried someone would hear me speaking parseltongue. Now I’m worried they’ll think I’m crying.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair, smiling sympathetically. In the days since Rita Skeeter’s article had been published, school had got markedly worse for Monty. Plenty of people supported him still, that was only expected given his importance in their society. But others had taken to quoting segments of the article to him, commenting on Hermione’s appearance, even altering the badges to read *POTTER DROOLS OVER GRANGER*. There had been an anonymous quote that said Monty could sometimes be heard crying at night. Harry hoped none of the other boys in his brother’s dorm had been the source. Monty’s privacy had already been thoroughly violated. He should not have to feel uncomfortable in the place he slept.

“Is Weasley still not talking to you?” Harry asked.

Monty’s face tightened with anger, but after a moment relaxed. “He’s worse. I didn’t ask for any of this, and he’s taking it out on me. I hate it. And Hermione keeps trying to go between us, like I have anything to apologize for.”

Hester, who was oddly attuned to his brother’s emotions, spiraled down to land next to him, her claws scraping on the stone. She was fascinating to watch, a snake with bird wings and legs. Nothing other than magic could have made a creature such as her.

“Have you talked to Black yet?” Harry asked. “About the article?”

“No,” Monty said, reaching out to brush Hester’s feathered crest. Lady Madeleine pricked Harry with her claws, also wanting attention. Harry placed a hand on her back.

“Why not?” he asked.

Monty looked to the side. “I don’t want to run to him for everything. I can handle it.”

“So you’ve talked to Professor McGonagall about one of your housemates giving photos of you to journalists?”

Monty gave him an alarmed look. “Of course not!”

Harry reached over and ruffled his little brother’s hair. “That’s Black’s job. It’s what he signed up for. I doubt he’ll think you’re bothering him if you ask for help.”

Monty scowled and ducked away. “Fine, I’ll tell him. He already knows about the article, though. He got really mad.”

Harry smiled apologetically. “There’s a reason why muggle celebrities have bodyguards. I’m sorry you have to put up with all of this, Monty.”

Monty shrugged. “But it helps you. You weren’t mentioned at all. That’s a good thing, right?”

“Right,” Harry said, guilt twisting his stomach into knots.

He could have given Skeeter a bigger scoop. He could have taken some, if not all, of the heat off Monty. He had thought so many times of telling the truth, at least telling Monty the truth, and it killed him for his brother to feel so alone. But then he would remember their mum had chosen to hide him away, and he had stayed hidden. That his dad agreed that keeping his identity hidden would protect both him and his brother from the Dark Lord and his servants. That he was more useful to Monty if he kept his distance.

He wasn’t doing a very good job of it.

Feeling like shit, and like the worst brother in the world, Harry decided to change topics.

“Are you going to Hogsmeade?”

“I can’t believe you aren’t going to Hogsmeade!” Phoebe exclaimed, startling a passing Beauxbatons student so badly he dropped his plate.

“I need to study,” Harry said, his tried and true excuse for getting out of everything. “I’ve only got three days.”

Astrid gave him a concerned look, but Harry ignored her, choosing instead to cut into the quiche that had appeared before him. Even the house-elves were trying to cheer him up.

“Do you want us to help?” Jasmine asked.

“No, I think you’ve helped enough,” Harry said, checking his watch. “Really, I’m fine. Everything is under control. The library’s been a zoo recently, it’ll be nice to have some quiet.”

“Someone’s sent another Howler,” Terence said, pointing up to a fearsome eagle owl flying straight at Professor Dumbledore. Professor Dumbledore, who had been chatting amicably with Madame Maxime over breakfast, turned to watch the owl approach him.

“I think I will take this to my office,” the headmaster said, reaching out to receive the Howler.

The owl did not comply, flying away as soon the headmaster touched the envelope. Dumbledore smiled at the owl’s antics, easily accepting that he would be screamed at in front of the entire school again.

The owl released the Howler just as it burst into flames.

I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU ALLOWED RITA SKEETER INTO HOGWARTS. YOU KNOW WHAT SHE IS LIKE. YOU KNEW HER AS A STUDENT! AND NOW YOU’RE LETTING HER AT A FOURTEEN YEAR OLD? EXPLAIN TO ME HOW PHOTOGRAPHS FROM MONTY’S DORMITORY ENDED UP IN THE DAILY PROPHET! AND FOR YOU LITTLE SHITS LISTENING IN, I WANT YOU TO IMAGINE IF IT HAPPENED TO YOU. I’VE GOT YOUR NAMES, THE DAILY PROPHET HELPFULLY PROVIDED THEM, AND BELIEVE ME I’VE WRITTEN TO YOUR PARENTS AND TOLD THEM EXACTLY WHAT YOU GET UP TO! I AM ASHAMED OF YOU, DUMBLEDORE!

AND MCGONAGALL, DON’T EVEN GET ME STARTED. YOU’VE DROPPED THE QUAFFLE ON THIS ONE. HOW CAN YOU, AS HEAD OF HOUSE, CONTINUE TO LET THE SAME STUDENTS FACE HARASSMENT? I THOUGHT THINGS WOULD GET BETTER AFTER VOLDEMORT WAS GONE, BUT IT’S THE SAME SHIT AT HOGWARTS,

EH? I'VE HEARD EVEN SNAPE TAKES POINTS FOR SLURS AGAINST MUGGLEBORNS! DO YOU CONDONE THIS, MCGONAGALL? HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND TOO? WHAT IF THAT BOY STARTED TAKING PICTURES OF THE GIRLS' DORMITORIES? WOULD YOU STILL HAVE YOUR HEAD UP YOUR ARSE?

Harry chanced a look at the Gryffindor table. His brother was casually eating his breakfast while his godfather continued berating the headmaster and deputy headmistress. Harry looked up at his dad, who was stoically drinking coffee. Professor Burbage was hiding her face, her shoulder shaking with laughter. Professor Lupin, and most of the rest of the staff, looked mortified.

When the rant ended several minutes later, the Great Hall was completely silent.

Colin Creevey burst into tears.

“Minerva,” Dumbledore said evenly, standing up. “Please join me in my office.”

They watched them leave the Great Hall. As soon as the doors shut, whispering broke out.

“Why does he keep letting us hear them?” Astrid asked. “Not that I’m complaining, that was fantastic.”

“Bet he gets off on it,” Adrian said, grinning at them.

Harry shrugged and went back to eating his quiche.

For the first time in months, Percy ate breakfast at the Burrow.

His mother moved industriously about the kitchen. Eggs were frying, bacon was baking, bread was sliced, freshly churned butter salted and patted into shape. His father smiled at him from across the table.

“There must be something you can do, Percy,” his mother said, directing plates and cutlery to deposit themselves at three places. “I thought the tournament was meant to be safe!”

His mother had been saying much the same thing since Rita Skeeter’s dubious article had been released. To him, to his father, to his older brothers. Percy was surprised she hadn’t owed Hogwarts yet.

“The rules are absolute,” Percy said, as he had said all the other times. “The Goblet of Fire’s decision is binding.”

Tea began pouring itself as his mother frowned at the still frying eggs.

“And he still cries about his parents,” she said, wiping tears away with her apron. “Oh, the poor dear. Just thinking about that...”

Percy accepted the cup of tea that floated towards him, taking a tentative sip. He felt incredibly thirsty. He blinked a few times, but his vision did not clear. He was so tired. Sometimes, when he was walking, he imagined stopping right where he was and lying down in the dirt.

“There was supposed to be an age limit!” his mother exclaimed, jolting Percy back to awareness. He couldn’t stop. He had to keep going.

He knew most of what he was feeling was due to the excess of external magic, which had been gradually building up for weeks. Percy had done his best to mitigate it, but he was on the verge of breaking down. He needed help.

“There was an age limit,” he mumbled. His father gave him a concerned look.

“Alright, Percy?” he asked, putting his *Daily Prophet* down.

Percy closed his eyes and took another sip of tea.

Why was he doing this to himself?

His mother constantly asking him to join them at meals. How upset she was at Monty being in the tournament. All Percy had to offer were platitudes.

“I’m fine,” he said, taking another sip of tea. “Just thinking about work.”

“You’re going to Hogwarts today?” his mother said, sitting down at the table.

“Yes,” Percy said. “I’ll be staying in Hogsmeade through the First Task.”

“Won’t you check on him, dear?” she asked, her big, brown eyes watering. Ginny did that too, when she wanted something.

“Of course, mother,” Percy said, finally confronting the food that had been placed before him. It all looked delicious. His mother’s cooking always was so wonderful.

Monty pulled his cloak around himself, wishing he had charmed it warmer. Sometimes he missed the cloak Harry had, thick and forest green, the best article of clothing he had ever seen the older boy wear. It was clearly something Harry cherished. Monty knew what it was like, to cherish a cloak.

Beside him, Luna wore a fur cloak in every shade of brown Monty could imagine, shining in the pale autumn sunlight. She had put the hood up, and to this she had affixed two branches

like antlers.

“Are you a jackalope?” Monty asked, utterly charmed by the possibility.

Luna smiled, skipping a few times as they neared the school gates.

Monty had not been looking forward to Hogsmeade, particularly with Hermione’s insistence he go. When she revealed she planned on meeting with Ron, he had nearly decided against it. But he didn’t want to be trapped in the castle, hiding from people infatuated with the Boy Who Lived, jealous friends, and predatory reporters. They confined him in a way the cupboard never had, and he refused to give in.

“Monty!”

At the gates, standing next to a winged boar, was Sirius Black.

The students walking to Hogsmeade gave Sirius a wide berth, which obviously amused the man. Monty was glad for it. When he had spoken to Sirius the night before, expressing his reservations about going to Hogsmeade, Sirius had made the suggestion they meet.

“Hey,” Monty said, quickening his steps. Luna kept pace, with Neville and Hermione straggling behind.

Luna pranced right up to Sirius and stared into his face.

“You must be Luna Lovegood,” Sirius said, nonplussed.

“You must be Stubby Boardman,” Luna replied with a nod, her stick-antlers wobbling dangerously.

“I was never much of a Hobgoblins fan,” Sirius said.

“Is that why you retired?” Luna asked.

Sirius laughed, then turned to pull Monty into a hug. “It’s good to see you, kid.”

“Hello, Mr. Black,” Hermione said, echoed by Neville.

Sirius nodded at them, then looked back to Monty. “Where do you want to go first?”

Monty was reluctant to visit the Three Broomsticks, given nearly everyone went there and there were people he wanted to avoid, but he caved in. He wanted a butterbeer, and with Sirius around Monty had got a break from the feeling of being constantly under watch. Sirius was tall, loud, wore his old leather jacket, and had a million stories to tell. Luna was fascinated by him, or perhaps his passing resemblance to Stubby Boardman, whoever that was.

Neville had run into some friends of his from Hufflepuff, Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott, but Hermione had stuck around. Monty didn't know if it was because she was enjoying herself, or because she was stubborn. Either way, it was nice to have her around without her needling him about Ron, or the tournament.

Rita Skeeter had taken one look at Sirius and fled in the opposite direction, her photographer racing after her.

The Three Broomsticks was unsurprisingly packed, and the crowd briefly fell silent when Sirius opened the door. Sirius ignored this, wading through to find a table for them all. Monty saw Neville with Hannah and Ernie Macmillan, trading Chocolate Frog Cards. Ron was sitting with Fred, George, and Lee, pointedly looking away from Monty. He spotted a few members of the Slytherin gobstones team, all proudly wearing their *EVANS RULES* badges. Sirius noticed, and immediately requested one of his own. Monty had acquired several, and happily gave him one.

"Your mum would have loved this," Sirius said, smiling as the badge turned to *POTTER DROOLS*. "Do they even know why it's a rainbow?"

"Probably not," Monty said.

This made Sirius laugh harder.

Hermione fidgeted, surreptitiously looking at where Ron sat.

"You can go sit with them, if you want," Monty said.

"No," Hermione said firmly. To his amazement, she pulled out her giant S.P.E.W. notebook.

Monty shared a look with Sirius, who knew all about S.P.E.W., while Luna happily sipped her butterbeer.

"I was thinking of getting the villagers involved," Hermione said idly, reviewing the extremely short list of members. Monty and Ron's names were at the top.

"You could," Sirius said. "You might ruffle a few feathers, though. Remember, Hogwarts is a refuge for house-elves. Witches and wizards are long-lived, and the families of those house-elves' former masters remember what they lost."

"I never thought of that," Hermione said, flipping to a blank page to take down notes. Monty looked around the Three Broomsticks, glad Colin Creevey had got his Hogsmeade privilege revoked. Monty had no idea about the sheer volume of pictures Colin had taken, and it was honestly disturbing. He understood why Colin was attached to the camera, but couldn't he take pictures of something else?

"Is that Hagrid?" Hermione asked, looking at the bar.

"Seems so," Sirius said coolly. He also knew about the skrewts.

“And Mr. Bagman,” Monty said, watching as Bagman laughed uproariously and slapped Hagrid on his massive shoulder. Bagman glanced at Monty, then leaned forward to whisper something to Hagrid. He threw back a shot of firewhiskey, placed several coins on the counter, then left. Hagrid finished his huge tankard, then parted the crowd to make his way towards Monty’s table.

“Sirius Black, is that you?” Hagrid said jovially.

“It is,” Sirius said, smiling in a way that didn’t reach his eyes. He clenched his hands together, so hard his knuckles turned white.

“And Hermione, good to see you,” Hagrid said, smiling at her. “What’s that you got there?”

Hagrid bent over her S.P.E.W. notebook, and whispered so quickly Monty barely caught it, “Meet me at my cabin at midnight. Bring your cloak.”

Hagrid stood up again, clearing his throat. He looked at Luna. “Nice to see you too...”

“Luna,” Monty provided.

“Right,” Hagrid said, winking at him.

Utterly perplexed, Monty watched Hagrid leave the Three Broomsticks, amazingly not bumping into anyone or knocking anything over.

“Do you think Hagrid’s interested in S.P.E.W.?” Hermione asked excitedly. “I knew he would come around!”

Sirius chuckled, but it sounded wrong. Monty knew he was reaching his limit. Something about Hagrid had set him off.

To Hermione, Monty said nothing, only took a sip of butterbeer. Why did Hagrid want to meet him at midnight? More importantly, why would he go?

Percy sat on the same hospital bed he had sat on for seven years, feeling strangely nostalgic for it.

“Thank you for seeing me,” he said, watching as Madam Pomfrey hurried back and forth.

“Oh, none of that,” she said brusquely, grabbing his wrist. She turned it over to look at his hand, tutted, and made another note. “Which part of *regular check-ups* do you young people not understand?”

“I have been busy,” Percy said.

She gave him an unimpressed look. “I’m sure you have been, Mr. Weasley. That’s no excuse. I would recommend you see a specialist at St. Mungo’s, but frankly Professor Snape and I *are* the specialists! Now, let me get a sample...”

Percy did not like disappointing people, and he particularly did not like disappointing a woman who had taken care of him for so many years. As he answered Madam Pomfrey’s questions about his last dose, his diet, his sleep, how he felt, her expression grew increasingly stern.

“I’ll have to factor the muggle food into your dosage,” she said, frowning as she jotted down more numbers. “How much of your diet does it constitute?”

By the time she was finished with her interrogation, Percy could see the students—Hogwarts, Durmstrang, and Beauxbatons—walking across the grounds, headed for Hogsmeade.

“Well, I must say I *am* glad you finally reached out to us,” Madam Pomfrey said as she prepared a syringe. Percy lifted up his shirt, glad he had the foresight to wear muggle clothes under his robes. Madam Pomfrey pinched his stomach, then gently slid the needle in. Percy twitched at the sudden rush of cold, long used to the slight discomfort that accompanied it. It faded to the background as the lingering ache finally, finally went away. He felt more alive. Like he was allowed to live.

“That should do it,” Madam Pomfrey said, standing back up. “How do you feel?”

Percy cleared his throat. “Much better, thank you.”

She gave him a faint smile and began cleaning up. “I’ll expect you here at least once a month. With the tournament,” she said, frowning in disapproval, “that should be no hardship. You’ll be here anyway!”

“Yes, Madam Pomfrey,” Percy said dutifully. He pulled down his shirt, and when she had gone to her office he put his robes back on. They settled over him, and he took comfort in their familiarity. He stood there for a moment, overwhelmed by relief. It had cost him half of his savings, and he was certain he had not been charged the full price, but it was worth every knut. The school supplying his litorin was something Percy had never taken for granted, and only a few months out of school had thrown those years into sharp relief. It had been easier to manage, with Harry going to so much effort for him. Harry would be immensely disappointed to see him slipping backwards.

Harry.

Percy quickly checked his watch, relaxing when he saw there was plenty of time. He parted the curtains and walked through the hospital wing, stopping briefly to thank Madam Pomfrey. She waved him off with a strict reminder.

The route from the hospital wing to the library was one he had walked many times. He passed the bathroom where Harry had been petrified by the basilisk. The spot where Peeves had heckled them with his mistletoe ditty, when Harry had kissed his hand. Percy blushed at the memory, and the one that followed. The agony of Amortentia.

Percy clenched his jaw and kept walking. It hadn't been a year since then. The memories were still sharp around the edges.

It was good that it was a Hogsmeade weekend. The castle was empty, save for first- and second-years, who largely kept to their common rooms. The professors were at Hogsmeade too, or in their offices. Some were helping prepare for the First Task. Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman were meeting with Professor Dumbledore for precisely that reason, and soon Percy's presence would be required. But he had time.

The library was quiet, and less dusty than Percy recalled. The house-elves must have fought hard for that, as many books preferred their contents and titles to be under a layer of grime. Madam Pince sat primly behind her desk. She took one look at him and returned to examining the book she held in white-gloved hands.

Percy assumed his pass to the Restricted Section was still valid and stepped over the velvet rope. He slowed down, hiding between two shelves to catch his breath. He looked around, hoping he hadn't been seen or followed. The Hogwarts library was open to all. He had every right to be there. If anyone asked, he was researching cauldrons.

Once he had his breathing under control, Percy moved. He knew where Harry's table was. He merely wanted to greet his former, and hopefully future, colleague. A fellow prefect. A perfectly normal thing to do.

Percy walked purposefully between the shelves, turning down an aisle that might have contained something involving cauldrons, and came to an abrupt stop.

It was Harry, once again in a place Percy had not expected. He was wearing muggle clothes, though less tattered than he usually did. Black trousers, a black sweater with the sleeves pushed up. He was intently reading, strands of night-black hair falling across his face. A book on wandlore, Percy distantly registered. Harry bit his lip, then turned a page.

Percy couldn't breathe.

Harry sighed, then closed the book. He placed it carefully on the shelf, nudging it so the spine was flush with the others. Then he turned towards Percy, his eyes widening slightly in surprise. A smile slowly appeared on his face. Harry crossed his arms and cocked his head, watching Percy with his endless black eyes.

Harry's mouth was already forming Percy's name. But Percy moved first. He walked right up to Harry, wrapped his arms around his shoulders, and kissed him.

Percy sighed against his lips, relaxing. He could feel Harry smile, fingers twisting in his hair.

"First-years are not allowed in the Restricted Section!" Madam Pince shouted, startling a laugh out of Harry.

He pulled back, his eyes sparkling, then took Percy's hand and led him deeper into the library.

Chapter End Notes

Who forgets about a kettle twice? This guy!

The title is in reference to Going to Georgia by the Mountain Goats, if you're curious. Anachronistic, but he did write Going to Scotland in 1996.

Also, some of the chapters numbers are significant, not sure if anyone has picked up on that. Only some though, when circumstances align.

A Change of Plan

Chapter Summary

November 1994

Still three days until the First Task

Chapter Notes

This is the longest chapter I've written for this fic, just over 5000 words, only because I could not bring myself to split the events of one day into three chapters.

Thank you all for your well-wishes <3

Harry's self-control was impeccable as he listened to Percy's diatribe against Rita Skeeter.

"Mother hasn't stopped talking about that article," Percy said with a slight frown. Harry stared at his lips, torn between kissing Percy and letting him rant. "I would say I am surprised the *Prophet* sent that drivel to press, but given the typical quality of their pieces..."

Harry traced the shell of his ear, delighted by how easily it turned pink.

"Evans, I am attempting to have a discussion," Percy said, a faint blush crossing his cheeks.

"Sorry," Harry said, trailing his fingers down Percy's neck. Percy shivered. "Continue."

"You are incorrigible," Percy said stiffly. "While I admit my own behavior is not above reproach, I must remind you we *are* in a library."

"We wouldn't want to traumatize the books," Harry said, leaning forward to kiss Percy's freckled cheek. He was impossibly endearing, and Harry had become dizzy with his proximity. He sighed, then reached down to take Percy's hand.

Percy looked at their laced fingers, then cleared his throat. "As I was saying, I can only conclude her motive is to sell papers. Mr. Crouch has said much the same. But in doing so, Skeeter undermines our efforts to strengthen the international magical community. It feeds into the nationalist ideologies that plagued us during the rise of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

Harry liked everything about Percy. He liked how passionate he was about his work, he liked how self-contained he was, he liked the books he read, his glasses, his freckles, his constant battle with his naturally messy hair, how he wore his robes, the way his mouth shaped his round vowels. He even liked how he called the Dark Lord *He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named*, the longest alias they had for him. It was ridiculous. It was Percy.

“True, these existed long before his movement gained prominence,” Percy continued, “though his actions mirror Grindelwald’s to a certain extent. I read an essay—I can’t recall where, I’ll send you a copy when I find it—that claims that our Ministry opposed Grindelwald not to free the Continent from the animus towards muggles, but due to the incipient threat he presented to our position in the global body politic. Only in retrospect do people say we joined the fight against him to uphold muggle and muggleborn rights. As you know, from personal experience no less, opposition to both has long persisted here.”

Harry reached over to push Percy’s glasses up. Percy cleared his throat again, his blush deepening.

“Dumbledore defeated him,” Harry said, caressing Percy’s jaw before dropping his hand again. “He was guaranteed a place in the ICW. The Ministry has been capitalizing on that duel for nearly half a century.”

“Precisely. Whether intentional or not, Skeeter’s article presents a very strong nationalist image. Centering the Boy Who Lived, our deliverance from an internal threat, stopping He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named before his activities gained too much traction overseas. She glosses over how Potter was unwillingly entered into the tournament, presenting it instead as something to be expected. Her blatant exclusion of the champions from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons...” Percy closed his eyes, taking a shaky breath. “It’s very patriotic, to ignore them.”

“And the poor muggleborn?” Harry prompted.

Percy’s expression darkened. “Unconscionable. Believe me, I have drafted a very strongly worded letter to the editor.”

“I don’t mind, Percy,” Harry said, pressing closer to him. Percy had objected to him transfiguring one of the library chairs into a bench, but not for long. “It’s better for me, if I’m not a topic of national news.”

Percy’s brow furrowed. “You are already well-known among those at Hogwarts, and some at the Ministry.”

Harry smiled wryly. “And were I more clever I wouldn’t be.”

Percy’s frown deepened.

“I can’t tell you,” Harry said apologetically. “Even alluding to it is stupid, honestly, but I do have very valid reasons for wishing to be overlooked.”

Percy turned to look at him, his brilliant hazel eyes clouded with concern. “Harry, I cannot conceive of anything less likely.”

Harry couldn’t help it. He cupped Percy’s face in one hand, watching in fascination as Percy’s breath hitched, his eyes dilated, then gently kissed him. He leaned back, smiling wickedly at Percy’s dazed expression.

“You got taller,” Percy said faintly.

“Barely,” Harry said. He glanced at the pocket watch Percy had placed on the table, watching the translucent clock face, the floating dials, the arcane symbols shimmering around it. It made Harry like Percy’s parents a little more, for having given him something he enjoyed. “What time is your meeting?”

Percy blinked, then sat upright. “I’ve tarried too long.”

Harry reluctantly let go of Percy’s hand, hoping he hadn’t made him late. He knew how much Percy valued punctuality. “Are you going to make it in time?”

Percy’s lips thinned as he picked up his watch. “I meant to be there an hour early. At most, I will be forty-five *minutes* early.”

He looked so crushed by this that Harry covered his mouth to hide a smile. “You best hurry, then. You wouldn’t want to be right on time. You’d never live it down.”

Percy frowned at him then stood, straightening his robes. “This is no laughing matter, Evans. Mr. Crouch is a very busy man.”

Harry stood as well, taking out his wand to untransfigure the chair. He kept his silence about Crouch, not wanting to upset Percy, not when they had so little time together. “Reckon I’ll see you at the First Task.”

Percy stopped fussing over his robes and looked at Harry, swallowing nervously. “Yes. I look forward to watching your performance.”

Harry smiled, looking Percy over. He had held back, but Percy still looked debauched. For Percy, at least. His skin was stained by a persistent blush, his hair in minor disarray. Harry couldn’t let anyone else see him like that.

“*Neit*,” Harry whispered, watching Percy’s dark, coppery curls return to a more genteel chaos. His blush would, tragically, fade on its own.

“I need to learn that spell,” Percy muttered, checking his watch again. “I really must be off. I shall see you at the First Task. Good day, Evans.”

Harry crossed his arms, not wanting to delay Percy further. He wouldn’t appreciate it. He watched as Percy quickly disappeared among the stacks. After a moment, he sat back down, burying his head in his arms and groaning. He hadn’t factored Percy watching into his machinations. He would have to revise his plans again.

“Harry?”

Harry slowly sat upright, not wanting to appear startled. It was Monty, his invisibility cloak draped around his shoulders. Harry had been so distracted by thinking of ways to impress Percy that he hadn't sensed Monty's approach.

“I thought you were at Hogsmeade,” Harry said.

“We just got back,” Monty said, walking to the table. “I said I needed the loo.”

Harry turned to face him. “What happened?”

“Was Percy just in here?” Monty asked. “I saw him leaving on my way in.”

Harry's expression froze. “Yeah, he's here to set up for the First Task.”

“Did he tell you about it?” Monty asked hopefully.

“No,” Harry said, pulling out a chair for Monty. “And I wouldn't ask him. I wouldn't want him to risk his job.”

Monty sat down, giving Harry a considering look. “You're friends with him?”

“We've spoken in the past,” Harry said.

Monty's eyes lit with revelation. “You fancy him, don't you?”

Harry sighed. His little brother was too smart. “I can neither confirm nor deny that.”

“Does he know?” Monty asked eagerly. “I mean, is he...”

“I think that's Percy's business, don't you?”

Monty sat back, shaking his head. “Ron would go spare.”

“Yeah, well, don't tell him,” Harry said. “Or anyone, for that matter.”

“Of course not,” Monty said, sounding offended. Then he smiled again. “You like Percy,” he said teasingly.

Harry glowered at him. “Weren't you meant to be in the loo?”

“Oh, right,” Monty said, still smiling to himself. It was just what Harry needed, his little brother taking the piss out of him for his infatuation with the former Head Boy. “Hagrid wants me to meet him at his hut at midnight.”

Harry refrained from making a joke at his brother's expense. “Did he say why?”

Monty shook his head. “Only to bring my cloak.”

Harry crossed his arms, leaning back in his seat. “Well, Percy’s here, as are Bagman and Crouch. And if Hagrid’s interested and wants to sneak you somewhere, I reckon the dragon will be showing up tonight.”

“You think I should go?” Monty asked.

Harry smiled at him. “I think *we* should go.”

Ludovic Bagman was trolled.

Percy kept his face blank as the man made a deranged attempt at chatting up Professor McGonagall. Perhaps he thought since she was an avid follower of quidditch, a former quidditch player herself, and widowed, she was amenable to his flattery.

Professor McGonagall was not.

“Ludo,” Mr. Crouch snapped. “We must focus on the task at hand. We are here for business, not pleasure.”

Professor McGonagall made a face like a cat preparing to cough up a hairball. The headmaster smiled at everyone, his default affable expression, while Flitwick sidled away from McGonagall.

“Weasley, when will the dragons arrive?”

Percy checked his watch. “In approximately nine hours, Mr. Crouch.”

“Good,” Mr. Crouch said. “That leaves us plenty of time to construct the enclosures. Dumbledore, would you like to review the plans again?”

“There is no need for that, Barty,” the headmaster said. “You were very thorough in communicating them to us this morning.”

Percy looked around the wide stretch of ground they stood on. They were on the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest, approaching the foothills of the mountains that encircled Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. The Forest was a riot of ochre and scarlet, interspersed with the rare spiny pillar of a pine, or a yew laden with bright red berries, their drying leaves rustling in the chill breeze.

The ground was flat, covered in scrubby grass, dead leaves, and weeds that struggled to grow in the shadow of the forest. They were so far from the castle that it was no longer visible, not even the tips of the towers which soared hundreds of feet into the air. The forest was oddly silent, as if in anticipation. Percy had the uneasy feeling of being watched.

At a gesture from Mr. Crouch, Percy produced the plans for the temporary stadium. Typically, a Ministry task force would be sent to construct it, but Mr. Crouch had been adamant regarding secrecy. There were already too many leaks about the Triwizard Tournament, as one could read in the published works of Rita Skeeter.

Professor McGonagall didn't spare a look for the detailed drawing of the planned stadium. She had spent hours in the headmaster's office that morning discussing it. Instead, she turned to the treeline and began transfiguring the towering, gnarled oaks into stands, while Professor Dumbledore began razing a substantial portion of the ground, dirt and weeds rising up in pillars, shifting into black bars of steel, each as wide as the elderly wizard and twenty times as tall. The ancient trees of the forest barely cleared the top of the cages Dumbledore erected.

Bagman was eventually sent back to Hogsmeade as there was nothing for him to do but watch. Percy, however, was very busy. He had to check the seating arrangements, confirm the amount of seating was adequate, check the dimension of the cages, the area of the enclosure, ensure the fences would withstand both dragon fire and brute strength, confirm charms were in place to protect the judges and audience, help raise the two tents, go back to the school to fetch Madam Pomfrey so she could set up the medical tent, keep Mr. Crouch updated on their itinerary, watch Professor Dumbledore speak with several centaurs and assure them no dragons would be set loose in or around the forest, check the charms again, and so on.

"There is nothing else we can do," Professor McGonagall said some hours later, checking over the headmaster's cages again. "Not until these creatures arrive."

"I have been assured that their handlers will have everything...well under hand," Mr. Crouch said, looking disappointed in his turn of phrase.

Professor Dumbledore looked at the sky, which had begun to darken as dusk settled over the grounds. "Will you join us in the castle for dinner, Barty?"

"No, thank you, Dumbledore," Mr. Crouch said, checking his watch. "I best go see what Ludo's been up to. Weasley, you will stay here to greet the party from Romania."

Percy ignored the concerned look Professor McGonagall gave him. "Yes, sir."

Mr. Crouch began striding away with Professor Dumbledore, his head bowed against the rising wind. Professor Flitwick hurried to keep up with them, giving Percy a pitying look as he passed. Professor McGonagall gave his shoulder a pat.

"I'll send a house-elf with dinner," she said, then went to join the others.

Percy watched them disappear around a cluster of trees, then turned back to take in the arena. The cages were well hidden behind sturdy walls that rose higher than the stands. The stands themselves were elevated like those at a quidditch pitch, over one hundred feet in the air and well beyond the height and fire breathing range of the dragons. Unless the dragons took flight, which Charlie had insisted they would not. As nesting mothers, it was nigh impossible to separate them from their eggs.

Not wanting to climb into the stands, Percy conjured a wooden chair for himself and sat, watching the stark peaks of the mountains as night fell over Hogwarts.

“You can take a break from meetings, Harry,” Killian offered in a hushed voice. Like the rest of the gobstones team, he wore his *POTTER DROOLS* badge with pride. “We understand if you need to get ready for the First Task.”

“No need, Avery,” Harry said, watching as Mafalda glared at the gobstone Derek had knocked out of the ring. “What task could compare to gobstones?”

Killian gave him a strange look.

“No man, beast, nor foul magics hold a sputtering flame to the unrelenting tide of a gobstone. In your naivete, you compare the witted to the witless, a soldier forged in the malodorous substances that coat the unworthy flesh of the fallen to a worm writhing in the mud. We are the trowel held above that worm, Avery, and with a mighty thrust we shall cleave it in twain.”

“Here, here!” Tracey shouted, raising an obsidian gobstone above her head.

Killian relaxed, then went to correct Derek’s hold.

Harry crossed his arms, walking over to observe Mafalda and Derek's game as it drew to a close. Vince, who had been taking notes, saluted him.

The last amethyst gobstone spiraled out of the ring, cracking against a wall. Mafalda, unlike many amateur gobstones players, did not bow her head. She sat straight up, grimly accepting the noxious purple torrent of her defeat.

“You're making good progress, Prewett,” Harry said, watching as she shook hands with a notably less soiled Derek. “You’re left-handed, that gives you an advantage. It’s harder to predict where the stones will land.”

Harry summoned his gobstones case. “You shall play against me.”

Mafalda watched with wide eyes as Harry wandlessly cleared the gobstones ring, and cleaned both her and Derek off. Derek bowed, then backed away with his own gobstones. Harry took his place, his sunstone gobstones rising out of his case and landing in Vince’s cupped hands. Mafalda stood and tipped her own amethyst gobstones in.

“Aside from myself, there is only one other left-handed gobstones player on a house team,” Harry said, watching as the amethyst and sunstone gobstones fell onto the floor in an iridescent waterfall the color of a sunrise, settling in an intricate matrix only a select few could ever hope to witness, much less comprehend. “Neville Longbottom, the Gryffindor team’s rising star.”

“He’s Monty’s friend,” Mafalda said. She too wore a badge, though hers scintillated with the message *EVANS RULES*.

Across the room, Ethan hissed at the name.

“Potter,” Harry corrected. “He does not play gobstones, and is therefore irrelevant.”

“Is everything about gobstones, Captain?” Mafalda asked innocently.

“This, above all,” Harry intoned, “to thy gobstone be true. You may have the first move, Prewett.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” she muttered, lining up her first shot. Harry sat back on his heels, saying nothing as she picked off one of his gobstones on the edge. Her bottle-washer fountained a glorious, grotesque yellow that washed over him like the baptismal waters of the River Jordan. Harry licked his lips, drawing a repulsed look from Mafalda.

“Like a rampaging nundu, you charge at the weakest target,” Harry said, leaning forward. “Toxic breath, flesh sloughing from bones. Here,” he said, pointing to a crescent arrangement of gobstones, “would begin a cascade. This is the beginning of the end of the game. Targeting that could either go very well or very poorly for you. Beginners go for easy shots, which is fine for a normal game of gobstones, but here we have a higher standard of play.”

Mafalda gaped at him, while Vince frantically took notes.

“We need to take in the entire composition of the field,” Harry continued, “and pick shots that will set up an ideal end game. So, I’m going to leave that area for you. Think about which angles you can hit it from, which gobstone to target, where the others might end up, what the field will look like when your turn is complete...”

When gobstones training was over, Mafalda and Graham were both exhausted. Harry didn’t keep them after hours, like Captain Lament had, but made sure they all got their homework done first, and that they got back to the common room before curfew.

“Avery,” he said, as Tracey rounded the youngest players up.

“Yeah?” Killian said as he packed away his gobstones.

“I’ll be taking your rounds tonight.”

Killian nearly dropped his prize bottle-washer. “You can’t be serious.”

“As a gobstone.”

“What does that even mean?”

Harry lowered his voice, making a show of looking for eavesdroppers. “It’s for training. For the First Task.”

Killian gave him a skeptical look. “If you say so.”

From the door, Mafalda watched him with calculating eyes.

“Percy!”

Percy closed *You and Your Owl*, looking up at his older brother. Charlie and several other dragon-keepers had just landed on brooms, dimly lit by the glow from Percy’s wand.

“Good evening, Charles,” Percy said, standing up and vanishing his chair. “I see you are leading the charge, as it were.”

“Yeah, we’ve got to make sure the enclosures are secure,” Charlie said, looking around the area. “You’ve really outdone yourself.”

“You can thank the headmaster and Professor McGonagall for that,” Percy said. “I merely checked the quality, to the best of my abilities.”

Charlie chuckled, then pulled Percy into a rough hug. Percy awkwardly patted his brother’s back.

“How have you been?” Charlie asked. “You aren’t exactly talkative in your letters.”

Percy pushed up his glasses. “They were letters sent in my capacity as a junior secretary.”

“That explains it,” Charlie said with a grin. “You know you can owl me outside of work hours, yeah?”

Percy busied himself by searching his robes for the scroll he needed to fill out. When had Charlie ever sent him a letter? Why was the onus on him?

“Let’s begin with the cages,” Percy said, walking across the cleared ground.

Charlie sighed, then followed after him. “Mum’s been owling me nonstop.”

“I am aware,” Percy said. “I have had the privilege of fielding her complaints day and night.”

“I wonder why she hasn’t mentioned that Evans kid,” Charlie said.

“Evans is more than capable of meeting the challenges presented in this tournament,” Percy said, opening the scroll. He needed Charlie to confirm the facilities were up to snuff. They only had two days to make any adjustments.

“I thought it might be because he’s gay,” Charlie said.

Percy stopped walking.

“Have you told her yet? How you feel about him?”

Percy turned to glare at his brother. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Charlie grimaced. “You don’t have to lie to me, Percy. At the World Cup, you two showed up together during the riot. I don’t think dad noticed, or the kids.”

Percy closed his eyes.

“And you went back as soon as you could,” Charlie said. “Bill brought it up to me later.”

“Brilliant,” Percy said acidly. “You and William are discussing my private affairs amongst each other. An excellent incentive for me to contribute.”

“It’s not like that, Perce,” Charlie said. “We’re just worried about you.”

“I neither need nor want your concern,” Percy said. “Though it is *greatly* appreciated.”

“Are you afraid of what mum and dad would think?” Charlie asked.

Percy stared at him. “You don’t have to live with her.”

“You don’t either,” Charlie said.

Percy scoffed. “Really, Charlie? You think I can run away to faff about with dragons on a whim? Do you have *any* idea how much my medication costs?”

Charlie’s face tightened with concern.

“Most of my salary,” Percy said. “Just for the nogtail organs, if a nogtail can even be acquired. Not to mention the cost of the other ingredients, nor the time and skill it takes to brew. So yes, Charlie, I *do* have to live with her. I cannot flaunt aspects of my personal life and then fuck off to Romania!”

Percy clenched his teeth, breathing heavily. He didn’t need this.

“I didn’t think about that,” Charlie said, sounding lost.

Percy laughed harshly. “Of course you didn’t. None of you ever do. Now, would you *please* allow me to do my job? As you may have gleaned, it is quite important that I keep it.”

“There's an owl for you,” Ron said stiffly, pointing at the school owl sitting on Monty's pillow.

“Yeah, I can see that,” Monty said.

Ron didn't respond, choosing instead to leave the dormitory.

Shaking his head, Monty untied the note from the owl.

Harry Evans will be on the third floor, training

Monty watched the school owl fly out of his dormitory window, wondering why Mafalda had sent him yet another message about the happenings in Slytherin. He had seen Ron, Fred, George, and even Ginny getting similar notes. It was all very strange. He knew Dennis Creevey was in classes with her, and had struck up a friendship with Mafalda. Dennis might know what was going on, but Monty was reluctant to talk to any Creevey regarding any matter.

The only conclusion he could come to was that Mafalda was spying on Harry. Monty had no idea why, and only hoped Mafalda did not pick up the hobby of photography.

As it was, Monty had homework to do, was meeting Harry later that night, and could find him whenever he wanted to with the Marauder's Map. Not that Mafalda knew any of that.

Monty stayed in the sanctuary of his dormitory, working on another essay about eighteenth century goblin rebellions, waiting for midnight to approach. Neville returned first, wishing Monty a good night before seeking refuge in his own bed. Dean and Seamus were arguing the merits of football versus quidditch, both greeting Monty with their usual exuberance.

That Monty hadn't put his own name in had only slightly diminished how impressive it was he was a champion. He knew his name had been put in under a fourth school, so he had essentially been the Goblet of Fire's only choice.

By half eleven, Ron had still not returned. Not wanting to deal with discreetly exiting the portrait hole while invisible, Monty put on his cloak, got his Firebolt from under his bed, made sure Hester was asleep and secure in her cage, and left via the window.

As he flew towards Hagrid's hut, Monty took out the Marauder's Map. Harry was already there with Lady Madeleine, standing in the pumpkin patch. Monty squinted, but couldn't make out anything. He silently landed behind a gourd that was approaching the size of a carriage. A small shape ran at him out of the dark, and Monty knelt down to scratch Lady Madeleine's ears.

"How did you find me?" Monty whispered, smiling as the cat began to purr.

"She can smell you," Harry said, stepping from behind another giant pumpkin. "And your broom."

"Meow."

“The cloak itself doesn't have a smell,” Harry said thoughtfully. “Interesting.”

“Are you going like that?” Monty asked, gesturing at Harry’s visibility.

“No, I was just waiting for you,” he said, taking out his wand. “Maddie and I will be behind you.”

“Meow.”

“Alright,” Monty said, watching as the older boy disappeared from view. He wished he was that good at Disillusionment; it had been a hellish month getting it to work on Hester. Trusting that Harry was following him, Monty walked up to Hagrid’s door and knocked.

What followed was perhaps the strangest procession Monty had been part of. Hagrid told him to keep his cloak on, keep quiet, and thereafter forgot Monty’s existence. Harry might as well have not turned himself invisible. Hagrid went directly to the Beauxbatons carriage, which was parked near the abraxan paddock. Madame Maxime answered the door, dressed to the nines in a silk shawl and strappy heeled boots bigger than the abraxans’ single-malt whiskey barrels.

“They're going on a date,” Harry whispered as Hagrid massacred the French language with a *bong-sewer*. “He’d make a good stoner,” he added.

Monty covered his mouth, afraid Hagrid and Madame Maxime would hear him laughing, but they were already walking at a remarkable pace, striding away from the carriage.

“I’m not running after them,” Monty said, pulling off his cloak. “I’ve got my broom with me. Want a lift?”

Harry appeared as suddenly as he had vanished. “Sounds good.”

So Monty, Harry, and Harry’s cat flew after Hagrid and Madame Maxime, while Harry tried to keep the cloak pulled over them all.

“This thing feels so weird,” Harry said, playing with the hem of the cloak. “I don't think it’s demiguise.”

“Me neither,” Monty said, glad his broom easily compensated for the additional weight. “Where is he going?”

“I doubt they’d keep a dragon close to the castle,” Harry said, getting out his wand in an effort to spell the cloak into compliance. “I imagine it’s rather far away.”

They flew silently for a while, trailing some distance behind Hagrid and Madame Maxime. Neither were hard to spot, so Monty wasn’t worried about losing sight of them.

“Do you hear that?” Harry asked. “It sounds like people shouting.”

Monty sped up, then stopped when there was a horrendous roar, followed by a massive gout of flame.

“Yeah, that’s pretty obvious,” Harry said. “Can you take us higher?”

Monty nodded, and his Firebolt rose above the treetops. He leaned forward, inching closer to a cluster of trees around which Hagrid and Madame Maxime disappeared.

“Higher,” Harry gently suggested. “A Hungarian Horntail can breathe fire up to forty feet.”

“You really think they brought the Horntail?” Monty asked as they rose even higher.

“They might have brought the Norwegian Ridgeback,” Harry said, “but your notes say she’s got scalerot.”

From high above, Monty had a clear view of the dragons.

Dragons. Multiple.

“They’ve brought one for each of us,” Monty said, carefully lowering his broom to get a better look.

“Chinese Fireball, Common Welsh Green, Swedish Short-Snout, and, yeah, a Hungarian Horntail,” Harry said. “Reckon I should’ve made the swooping evil bigger.”

They watched as a team of eight burly witches and wizards collectively stunned one of the dragons.

“Is that Karkaroff?” Harry said.

Monty turned the broom around just in time to see the headmaster of Durmstrang sneak into the trees.

“Man hasn’t even Disillusioned himself,” Harry said, shaking his head.

“That’s not fair, is it?” Monty said. “They’re bound to tell Krum and Delacour.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “No one’s told me shit. You’re lucky Hagrid did, though I reckon we could’ve found this ourselves.”

“You think?” Monty said sarcastically as the Horntail spewed flames at her handlers, seconds before she too was stunned unconscious.

Hagrid started talking to one of Ron’s brothers, Charlie, who looked cross at Madame Maxime having shown up as well.

“Bet he’s still mad about the egg,” Harry muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Harry said, taking out a book.

“What’s that?” Monty asked.

“A guide to dragon-keeping,” Harry said, flipping to a page showing a bulky man straddling a dragon’s back, affixing a harness around its forelegs and snout. “Though I’m starting to question how accurate it is.” He sighed and closed the book. “Percy would lose his rag if he knew Charlie had invited Hagrid round.”

Monty grinned at him, to which Harry rolled his eyes. He couldn’t believe that, of all people, Harry liked stickler for the rules, stick up his arse, twelve O.W.L.s, constantly polishing his prefect badge, bossy, nosy, perfectionist, former Head Boy, current Ministry of Magic employee, Percy Weasley.

“Piss off,” Harry said, putting his book away. “Percy’s well fit. Get us closer so we can listen in.”

Hagrid and Charlie weren’t trying to be discreet at all. Monty watched several dragon-keepers hobbling towards the Hungarian Horntail, carrying huge eggs that looked carved from stone, laying them by her side. He imagined that was why all the dragons had been upset, having been separated from their eggs.

“We should get back,” Harry said quietly, once Charlie started complaining about Mrs. Weasley’s apparent obsession with the Skeeter article.

As Monty flew them back, the initial shock of seeing four dragons wore off, leaving him in a cold sweat. They looked smaller from above, but that a creature that large existed was something he struggled to rationalize. It simply didn’t feel real. How could it be? Monty couldn’t even think of a muggle animal to compare it to, nor had any point of reference for an actual, fire-breathing, rampaging dragon. His hands tightened on his broom. He couldn’t stop shaking.

Harry placed a steadying hand on Monty’s shoulder.

“Alright,” Harry said, his voice filled with conviction. “Change of plan.”

An Apology

Chapter Summary

November 1994

Day before the First Task

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Severus ignored the incessant giggling of Charity Burbage at the sight of the rainbow the Slytherin table had become. He eyed her cup of tea, and contemplated switching it with something that had a more sedative effect.

“Ignorance is bliss,” she chortled, wiping tears from her eyes.

“Are you speaking from experience?” he replied, picking up his coffee. He was indulging himself with a plain piece of toast. He hadn’t much of an appetite of late.

“What crawled up your arse and died?” Charity asked, frowning at his toast. She pushed a jar of marmalade at him.

Severus pushed it back. “The last person suicidal enough to use such a vulgar phrase with me.”

“Two’s company,” she said, winking at him. “Honestly, Severus, he’ll be fine. Look at these kids, calm as clams.”

Severus glanced at Potter, who was eating bacon without a care in the world. The boy had spent a portion of his Sunday not preparing for his very literal trial by fire, but interrogating Severus about mass-altering potions. At the Slytherin table, his son was fighting Urquhart over a book.

“Do they have any idea what’s in store for them?” Charity asked, her voice now tinged with concern. “I knew this tournament was a shite idea.”

She looked at him, then scowled at the marmalade. In a staggering violation of the sanctity of his meal, Charity seized his toast and began adulterating it.

“You’ve got to eat something, Severus,” she chastised, thankfully not globbing on the marmalade like she had done with her own. “You’re starting to look like a stick insect. Where’s the bacon?”

A plate of sizzling bacon appeared on the table; the house-elves were always quick to accommodate Charity.

Severus caught Lupin watching this madness with a faint smile. The man was intelligent enough to quickly pretend he hadn't noticed the indignity of marmalade. He knew better than to offend the person who made his potions.

"Bob's your uncle," Charity said victoriously, slamming the plate in front of him. It had toast defiled by marmalade, several pieces of bacon, and a sliced pear. "Fit for a king."

Severus sighed, then picked up the piece of toast. Given Charity had prepared the plate for him, he had no choice.

The flutterby bush quivered in anticipation as Monty raised his pair of secateurs. They only bloomed once a century, and Hogwarts boasted several hundred specimens in rotation. Monty had no idea where Professor Sprout kept them all. The ones in bloom that year were in the greenhouses for N.E.W.T. Herbology students, as their subtle scent lured the unwary to death by butterfly kisses. The plant before Monty had leaves of spring green that slowly lifted and fell, like the wings of a butterfly. He clipped off a stalk that was trying to set down more roots, and the flutterby bush sagged in relief.

"I wish we could work with the blooming ones," Neville said wistfully, twisting a dead leaf off. Monty watched it drift to the ground, wafting back and forth.

"I bet Professor Sprout would let you if you asked," Hannah Abbott said, smiling brightly from the next table over. Monty bent down to pick up the leaf. He stuck it into his pocket, then straightened. "You're her best student."

Neville mumbled something, blushing at her praise. Susan Bones started giggling, until Hannah hushed her.

Monty frowned at his flutterby bush, at its flapping leaves so reminiscent of wings.

"I know these are carnivorous," Monty said, gently parting the antennae-like stalks, searching for more dead weight to cut from the plant. "I bet the dried leaves lose some potency."

Hermione, who was working at a nearby table with Ron, aggressively pruned her flutterby bush, which appeared to be shaking in fright.

"These ones bloomed last year," Neville said, pulling a leaf toward himself. He frowned at a spot of brown, then clipped the leaf off. "If you want them at their peak, you need the ones that'll bloom next year. Once they bloom, all of their energy is put into producing their fragrance."

“Exactly right, Longbottom,” Professor Sprout said, startling Neville so badly he nearly decapitated the flutterby bush. “Most people are only interested in using the blossoms for love potions! What are you thinking of, Potter?”

Monty looked at the bush again, at its fluttering green leaves. “Well, it looks like something that could fly. It’s less aggressive than the bouncing bulbs.”

“True,” Professor Sprout said, beaming at him. “As you ought to have learned in potions, the metaphorical meaning is often just as important as the literal. Flutterby bushes are not true aerial plants, though. Imagine that! They’d be an absolute menace if they could fly around. And don’t you get any ideas,” she told Monty’s plant sternly, which had gone suspiciously still.

“Do you think I could have a clipping, professor?” Monty asked.

Professor Sprout gestured at the ground strewn with leaves and stalks. “Take your pick, Potter! Let me know what you come up with, I’d be inclined to give you extra credit if you find a new use!” She hurried off to deal with the conflagration at Seamus and Dean’s table.

“Extra credit?” Neville said, sounding almost offended. “You’d go down in history. It’s not just anyone who finds new uses for plants.”

Monty suppressed a smile as he trimmed another stalk. He’d much rather be in books for having done something, than having something done to him.

Harry walked into Defense class still annoyed from breakfast. Astrid was monstrously strong, and easily overpowered him. He had to resort to magic to get the library book back without damaging it. She was still laughing about it.

“I told you,” he whispered, “I read it for the articles.”

“Bullshit,” Astrid said happily. “I’ve seen the look on your face, Haz. My question is, who’s the dragon and who’s the tamer?”

“It is legitimately a guide for dragon-keepers,” Harry protested, sitting down in the back of the classroom. He didn’t want Lupin to get too close a look at him, nor did Harry want to accidentally set the man on fire.

He knew Monty liked Lupin, but Harry thought he had a rather weak character. Lycanthropy defined Remus Lupin. Harry could not imagine letting any of his medical conditions control such a huge portion of his life. Then again, no one was pushing legislation through the Wizengamot targeting him. It wasn’t an altogether fair comparison.

“Only someone truly insane would attempt the techniques depicted in that book,” Cassius said, sitting in front of him.

“Hagrid could,” Harry said.

“Case in point.”

Professor Lupin walked in, and thankfully Harry’s friends left off mocking his newfound interest in dragon taming. They hadn’t connected it with the First Task, which Harry blamed Adrian and his gifts of salacious literature for. It had apparently set a precedent.

“You may fascinate a dragon with a hefty piece of meat,” Astrid quoted teasingly to him.

“Alright, class,” Professor Lupin said, clapping to get their attention. “Today we will be reviewing shield charms. Grab your things, we’ll be practicing in the Great Hall.”

There was some muttering as people who had already got their books out were made to put them back away. No one complained, though, as Professor Lupin led them downstairs. Practicals were always favored over lectures.

“I thought we were starting inferi this week,” Terence said, taking the stairs two at a time.

“I bet we did poorly on last week’s quiz,” Phoebe said, Felipe the frog croaking sadly.

“Speak for yourself,” Alicia Spinnet said from the cluster of Gryffindors.

“What was that, Spinnet?” Astrid demanded, taking a step in front of Phoebe. “Did your keeper eat a clutch of spoiled doxy eggs again?”

Adrian grabbed her arm, dragging Astrid into the Great Hall before she could start a fight. Harry crossed his arms, following close behind.

The tables had been stacked against the walls, leaving the entire hall for them to spread out in. Lupin began separating them into pairs, and to Harry’s dismay he was the odd one out. He always liked putting Fred and George in their place.

“You’re with me today, Harry,” Lupin said, smiling encouragingly.

“Yes, professor,” Harry said, walking with Lupin so they stood some distance from the rest of the class.

“I know you enjoy running circles around a certain set of twins,” Lupin said wryly, “but I’m worried you’re beginning to get bored.”

Harry said nothing, not wanting to outright agree with him. The spells they were learning and practicing in class were things he could do as a third-year.

“I hope I can offer you more of a challenge,” Lupin said, drawing his wand and taking a few steps back. “I’ll be attacking. Do your best to defend yourself.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, taking out his own wand and holding it out.

“*Lacarnum inflamari!*” Lupin abruptly shouted. It was a long incantation, and Harry knew what he wanted to do before Lupin had finished saying it.

“*Madefactum,*” he said, annoyed that his robes were now wet, steaming from Lupin’s attempt to set them on fire. *Lacarnum Inflamari* was devious, as the wand didn’t emit flames as with other fire spells. It set the targeted clothing on fire directly and immediately. It was a hex. They were supposed to only use jinxes.

“*Tergeo,*” he said, pointing his wand at his soaked robes. They dried instantly, but Lupin was already casting again.

“*Confringo!*”

“*Protego!*”

The spell blasted Harry’s shield in a deafening torrent of flames. He narrowed his eyes, trying to see through the smoke.

“*Confringam infernas!*”

“Shit,” Harry muttered. “*Prohibeo caelorum!*”

He had no idea what Lupin was thinking with such an intense conjuration, watching as the dazzling blue light of his spell lanced through the molten lava bubbling into ferociously hot columns around him.

“*Incendio!*”

Harry dropped to the ground, the heat from Lupin’s spell already fading from the stones. He reminded himself that he was supposed to be defending, not fighting back. A gout of flame passed overhead, close enough to singe his hair.

“*Faciatus cultros!*”

“God damnit, *protego totalum! Fianto duri!*”

Harry had no idea *what* was turning into knives, until the smoke from all the fire Lupin had conjured began to solidify and fly towards him, dark blurs that stabbed into the hardened shield that contracted around him. Harry waited for the next spell, breathing heavily.

“Well done, Harry,” Lupin said, his voice muffled by the shield. The knives that had fallen to the floor burst back into smoke and dissipated. The haze gradually cleared, and he saw Lupin sweeping his wand back and forth to blow away the rest.

Harry stood and brushed himself off. No one else had bothered working on their shield charms. The entire class had been watching whatever the hell Lupin was putting him through. Their area was now charred, pitted with gaping, smoking holes from when Lupin had tried to boil him in lava.

“Work on your transfiguration,” Lupin said, gesturing to the heavily damaged floor. He gave Harry a significant look. “I need to get your classmates back on task.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, watching as people hastily started practicing, now that their professor was paying attention. Bewildered, Harry began restoring the floor to its original state.

“I’m really looking forward to lunch,” Monty said as he and Neville walked up from the Black Lake. Professor Grubbly-Plank had shown them how the flying seahorses were doing in their rehabilitation tank. The little seahorses were still struggling to stay upright, floundering upside down in the air, turning red in distress. The only reason they had been sequestered was because they were female and were needed to maintain the local population, otherwise they would have been potions ingredients.

“What do you think they’ll have?” Neville said, glancing at the overcast sky. “Beef stew would be nice.”

As they began walking up the steps to the entrance hall, they found the door blocked. Hermione was standing there with her hands on her hips.

“How could you be thinking of lunch at a time like this!” she exclaimed. “The First Task is tomorrow!”

Monty hiked up his bag. “It could be my last meal, Hermione.”

Hermione gave him a look of outrage. “That’s not funny! You need to do *something* to be ready for tomorrow!”

Monty tried to move around her, but others had begun walking up the steps.

“What, are you too good for her to help you?” Ron said bitingly as he passed.

“Are you too much of a prideful git to admit when you’re wrong?” Monty shot back. “I hope you shit yourself tomorrow when you see what I’m up against.”

Ron glared at him but said nothing, stomping up the stairs. Hermione looked like she wanted to say something, but held back, standing aside to let Ron pass with the other Gryffindors.

“Listen,” Monty said to her. “I’m going to have lunch. Then Nev and I were going to the library. You can come with if you’d like.”

Hermione was still watching Ron, but she turned back to him and gave a shaky smile.

“Today, you will be brewing the Fire-Protection Potion,” Professor Snape said. He pointed his wand behind him, and a dust cloth flew away to reveal the instructions, written in small, neat script. “This will require the blood of a single frost salamander,” he continued, gesturing at the fireplace against one wall. Instead of coals, there were chunks of ice exuding wispy white vapor, crawling with sparkling, ice blue salamanders.

“But they’re so cute,” Jasmine said softly.

“You will have to exsanguinate the salamanders yourselves,” Professor Snape said. “The blood needs to remain below freezing, and it quickly begins heating once outside of the salamander’s body.”

“I’ll do yours,” Adrian said, smiling at Jasmine. She gave him a flat look, then pointedly began honing her potions knife.

“Once you have successfully completed the potion,” Professor Snape said, “I will be testing its efficacy.”

Cedric Diggory raised his hand. Professor Snape ignored him.

“Begin.”

Harry dug out his pair of dragonhide gloves and approached the cold fireplace. The last thing he needed was frostbite from a salamander

“The fates have informed me,” Professor Trelawney intoned, flickering firelight reflecting in her glasses, “that we must revisit horoscopy.”

Monty closed his book on lunamancy, which he had already started reading. He had been wondering how Professor Trelawney intended to teach it in the middle of the day, when the moon wasn’t visible.

“Today,” she continued, walking ponderously between the tables, “you shall consider the position of Mars and Saturn to the Sun.” She swept her arm out, beaded bracelets rattling, her fingers flashing with rings, and pointed to a window. The curtains were drawn. They could not see the sun.

Professor Trelawney neared Monty’s table, pulling her many shawls tighter around her thin shoulders. “I am afraid that Mercury is in opposition. However,” she said, raising her hand, “it is in square to Mars! Mr. Potter!”

Monty looked at her curiously.

“You are a Leo,” Professor Trelawney said, sweeping towards him.

“I am,” he agreed.

“You are in grave danger,” she said, her voice trembling with portent. “You face a sudden, violent, *fiery* death!”

Neville gave a choked sob, frantically scanning his birth chart. It was identical to Monty’s so he was in for a fiery death too.

Monty, for his part, nodded solemnly. “Since the Sun is square to Mars, I shouldn’t take any unnecessary risks.”

Professor Trelawney’s lip trembled, and she placed both hands over her heart. “Oh, my dear boy!”

“The Sun is my ruling body,” he continued, “and since it’s in conjunction with Pluto, I must harness a secret power to prevail.”

“Yes!” Professor Trelawney cried, throwing her arms out, scarves and shawls fluttering around her. “Yes! Do you see, children? The planets have aligned!”

“They’re always in some sort of alignment,” Monty said. But Professor Trelawney was too caught up in the throes of revelation to hear.

“Professor?”

Cedric Diggory was standing at the front of the classroom, having just consumed his Fire-Protection Potion.

“What is it, Diggory?” Harry’s dad asked.

“How exactly are we testing the potion?” Cedric asked, trepidation marring his generically handsome face.

“How do you think?” Harry’s dad said, pointing his wand at Cedric. “*Incendium terram!*”

The ground at Cedric’s feet burst into flames, roaring up to consume him. People screamed. Harry’s eyes danced with the fire, and he fought to keep the smile from his face.

His dad lowered his wand, and the flames died down to reveal an unscathed Cedric.

Scattered applause broke out.

“Did he do the spell wrong?” Adrian asked. “Try again, sir!”

“Davies,” Harry’s dad said, glowering at the Ravenclaw quidditch team’s captain. “You’re next.”

Monty sat down to dinner, ready for the day to be over. Studying in the library with Hermione had been unproductive. He hadn’t wanted to tell her what the First Task involved, and she had spent a considerable amount of time complaining about Krum and the fans stalking him through the library. Professor Trelawney had been unusually positive, and he got the impression she was trying to hint at something. Whatever it was, Monty wanted to get through dinner, talk to Sirius, then go to bed.

Luna sat next to him and had charmed her asparagus to dance around, drawing looks of annoyance from others at the Gryffindor table. Hermione and Ron were at the other end of the table, whispering to each other and shooting him looks. Monty disliked when strangers did that, and he doubly hated it when his friends did. So he watched the vegetables shimmy for a moment, then turned to his own less entertaining food.

“Are you really going to be okay tomorrow?” Neville asked quietly.

“Fleamont’s got it all worked out,” Luna said as a carrot and several brussel sprouts joined the asparagus in a conga line.

“I’ve been thinking,” Neville said cautiously. “Hermione’s right. I haven’t seen you practicing anything. We’ve only been doing school work.”

“Yeah,” Monty said, breaking into the crust of his pie, curious what was inside.

“How are you so calm?” Neville asked, his voice dropping further. “I think I’m more scared for you than you are!”

“Because I’m confident,” Monty said. He was, in all honesty, more anxious than he had ever been in his life. He didn’t want to think about the First Task, or how he had got in the tournament, or any of the other thoughts that had plagued him for weeks. He trusted Harry. He had a plan, a plan Monty knew was going to work. And if it didn’t, there was a backup plan. And another. He’d actually lost track of all of them, not that he’d tell Harry.

He was following Harry's lead. Harry acted totally unconcerned by the tournament. It would have been galling to be the only one visibly freaking out about the First Task. Harry was way too cool for that.

“I wish I was,” Neville said, frowning at his plate.

“You are,” Monty said. “When it comes to Herbology, at least. And you’re loads better at Defense.”

“Thanks to you helping me,” Neville said, not looking up.

“You help me with Herbology,” Monty pointed out. “That’s what friends do, they help each other.”

He looked over at Ron and Hermione, who had both fallen silent. Ron stared at his plate, his face turning red. Hermione started whispering to him again, but he shook his head, got out of his seat, and walked out of the Great Hall.

Monty sighed, then went back to prodding his pie. He had no idea why he still cared about Ron’s feelings when the other boy clearly didn’t give a shit about his.

Harry was in bed, looking through the circle Frankie constantly swam around his head. He had excused himself from the common room, not feeling up to socializing. Lady Madeleine was roaming the castle, Benjy II was sleeping on his trunk, the wireless was off, his retainers were in. His mind had been going around in circles, trying to think of everything that could possibly happen while knowing he could not plan for everything. What he did know was his brother would make it through the First Task. It didn’t matter what happened to him, so long as Monty was safe.

The door to his dormitory opened, and Harry looked over to see Astrid walking in.

“Hey,” he said.

Astrid walked right up to his bed and sat down. She took a deep breath, then asked, “Are you mad at me?”

Harry sighed, then pushed himself to a seated position. “Why are you asking me that?”

“You haven’t come to any of our quidditch practices,” she said, staring hard at the floor. “And you just feel...off.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair. “I didn’t want to be in the tournament.”

Astrid looked up at him. “Why didn’t you just *say* that?”

“I didn’t think anyone would believe me,” Harry said. “I didn’t want to talk about it. And I also *did* want to be in it. I was furious when Dumbledore said my name.”

“But why wouldn’t you want to be?” she asked.

Harry reached into a pocket, pulling out a Calming Draught.

“Do you know what this is?”

“I’m not stupid.”

“I have to carry these with me all the time,” Harry said, “because I’ve got a medical condition that could kill me if I experience too much stress. My body physically cannot handle it. I have to meet with a specialist at St. Mungo’s to transfigure my organs so they work right. It’s not a permanent solution.”

Astrid gripped her robes. “Haz...”

“This tournament could kill me,” Harry continued. “Not the dragon, I can handle that—”

“Dragon?” Astrid said, turning sharply to him.

“—but the stress from facing it. That’s why when I end up in the hospital wing, it takes days for me to get out.”

“I didn’t know,” Astrid said. “Harry, you could have told me!”

“I know,” Harry said, putting the vial away. “I could have. I probably should have, for my own sake. And I’m not exactly thrilled about what you did to Cedric.”

Astrid looked away, her expression becoming closed off.

“It’s not just that it’s wrong to do that to someone,” Harry said. “That kind of magic affects you too. You can’t put someone under Imperius and be the same person after. Not to mention Azkaban. It’s not worth your life, Astrid.”

“I know that,” she said bitterly. “I knew I fucked up right away. I was just so angry.” She closed her eyes, her face twisting. “I know it was wrong, but he gets to go around like nothing happened. And *you* have to put up with all this shit! I hate it, and what can I do? Beat him at quidditch? It’s not fair.”

Harry crossed his arms, feeling far too vulnerable. “He’s not worth it.”

“No, but *you* are,” Astrid said. “Fuck!” She jumped up and began pacing the dormitory, looking like she wanted to punch something. “I thought I was doing you a favor! And now you’re stuck in this thing, and all anyone’s talking about is that little bitch Potter, and there’s a fucking dragon, and you might *die*.”

“Not from the dragon,” Harry said, smiling slightly.

Astrid glared at him, then stopped next to his bed. “I’m sorry, Harry. If you really wanted to do the tournament, you would have found a way. I should’ve known that.”

“Yeah,” Harry admitted, standing up to give Astrid a rare hug. She held onto him like she was afraid he would disappear if she let go. “I’m not that mad anymore. I think it’ll all work out in the end.”

Chapter End Notes

As I was thinking of a title for this chapter, I remembered this song existed.

[Apology](#) by Astrid Oto

Bad Eggs

Chapter Summary

November 1994

The First Task

Chapter Notes

I guess this is a triple chapter. God, I am *sweating*. I hope you guys like it!

The bitter, iron stench stung his nose. Steam rose from the shifting, thick liquid, as from the bleeding carcass of some arctic beast. After taking this potion every month for over two years, Harry still had not grown used to it. He could pretend. He was a good actor.

He put the goblet to his lips, fighting the urge to gag as the potion flooded his mouth, his senses, viscous and vile. It made his empty stomach churn. He kept drinking, aware Madam Pomfrey was watching to ensure he had consumed the entire dosage. Harry grimly bore this scrutiny, having been in the place she stood. Wolfsbane was a fouler concoction, and had to be administered more frequently. Knowing that Lupin had it worse offered no relief in the moment. What was the use in comparing their pain?

“Armed with only their wands,” Madam Pomfrey said, shaking her head. *“Ridiculous! Don’t you worry, Mr. Evans. I’ll be in the medical tent, with plenty of Calming Draughts on hand. Unbelievable. This school... No disrespect to the headmaster, but I suspect Severus is right. He’s gone senile. Now, he could do with a visit to the hospital wing...”*

Harry kept drinking, his amusement growing as she railed against the injustices done to her patients. Madam Pomfrey was trying to cheer him up, in her own way. It seemed all of the staff had learned of the dragons, once they had arrived. Hagrid couldn’t keep a secret to save his life. Even Professor Trelawney had been roaming outside of the North Tower, rambling about portents of fire. No one had come outright and said it, of course. Mr. Crouch had been adamant that the champions not receive assistance from professors. Not even Monty was an exception, it seemed, save the indiscretions of groundskeepers.

Only Harry’s proximity to Percy, and Monty’s connection to the Weasley family as a whole, had tipped them off well in advance. He and Monty had overheard Charlie say he hadn’t told his own mother about his, and the dragons’, involvement. But him telling Hagrid, Hagrid telling Monty and Madame Maxime, their conspicuous date to the dragon pen that Karkaroff

had easily seen from the Durmstrang ship, signified how easily a secret could get out. It made Harry reconsider everything he had thought to share with anyone. He had to assume that telling one person was as good as everyone knowing. He trusted his brother, he trusted his dad, he trusted Astrid, and obviously he trusted Percy, but not entirely. Never with the whole truth. Harry would not risk his brother's life to assuage someone's curiosity, or to lessen his own burdens.

Harry finished his potion, wishing he had something to wash away the sticky, salty taste of blood that filled his mouth.

"I've got to go to Herbology," Harry said, handing the goblet back to Madam Pomfrey. He sighed and hung his head. "I don't want to."

Madam Pomfrey tutted. "Have a lie down, Mr. Evans. I'll send a note to Pomona. Surely she will understand! Having lessons before such an event, the nerve. Whose brilliant idea was that? Well, I can tell who *my* guess is!"

"Do you think I could stay here until the First Task?" he asked, looking up at her.

"You may," Madam Pomfrey said firmly. She looked into the empty goblet, glanced at Lady Madeleine crawling under the curtains, pursed her lips, and walked back to her office.

When she was out of sight, Harry reached for his robes. He pulled Benjy II out of a pocket, along with a scrap of parchment, and a quill. Lady Madeleine watched him, following the feathered quill as he wrote, tensing. When he was finished, Benjy II took the tightly rolled note into his mouth and flew away. Harry gave the quill to Lady Madeleine to play with.

He sighed, then laid down on the hospital bed. Lady Madeleine jumped onto the bed, curling up next to him and gnawing on the quill. In a few short hours, his little brother would be face-to-face with an enraged dragon. He looked up at the white expanse of ceiling, through the golden path of the peculiar fish that had followed him since he was twelve years old.

The plush pillow under his head, the soft bed, the steady purring of his cat, the dry, sterile scent of the infirmary, the taste of blood thick on his tongue, the potion surging in his stomach, its subtle magic simmering through his blood, his bones, the faint barking of Hagrid's boarhound Fang drifting through the cracked window, the chill breeze that made his curtains ripple, carrying the organic smells of the Black Lake, dying grass crushed underfoot, the earthy, piney, enigmatic scent of the Forbidden Forest, the grounds thrumming with unseen life.

Harry breathed out, sinking into the crystalline pool of his mind, the pure, alkaline waters in which no thought, no sensation could survive. He felt nothing, had no awareness, not even of the sere emptiness of a fully occluded mind.

“It is time.”

Harry resurfaced, not surprised to see the shadows and light had transformed without his awareness. His father was standing over him, a look of mild reproof, of concern, drawn in the fine lines of his face.

Harry sat up, reality reasserting itself with dizzying ferocity. Lady Madeline brushed against him, giving his hand a comforting lick. Harry looked up at his father, who unwaveringly met his gaze.

“I’m ready.”

Monty yawned, covering his mouth as Professor Binns droned on about goblins and their many rebellions. There had been enough of them for a separate seven-year course, though Monty was uncertain if Binns had the awareness to conduct it. He seemed less substantial than the other ghosts, and Monty had only ever seen him in class. What was Binns when he wasn’t a professor? His identity had been so tied to teaching he had gone to sleep, passed away, his spirit rising in the morning to give the next lecture. It was disturbing, to be reduced so. Monty did not envy the dead, nor those who chose to linger.

There was a faint scratch at the window. Monty sat up slightly, and saw it was Benjy II. Curiously, no one else seemed to have heard, other than Neville. Monty stood and walked over to the window, a thing allowed in History of Magic as Binns was oblivious to what happened in his classroom. He was invested only in what he had to say, not whether it was actually heard by anyone.

Benjy II had landed on the sill, and lifted his head to present a small scroll to Monty. Monty took it, and the toy thestral took off again, flying over a crenellation and disappearing from view.

“What is it?” Neville asked when Monty returned to his seat. His actions had drawn the attention of the entire class, which had earlier been split between offering him support and spitting invectives. One of the Slytherin boys, Theodore Nott, was staring at Monty with wide eyes, whereas the others merely looked confused, or annoyed. It took Monty a moment to understand Nott must have seen the little thestral too, and what that meant.

“I don’t know,” Monty said to Neville, opening the scroll.

I’m staying in the infirmary until the First Task. I’m fine. I’ll see you there.

Monty rolled it up again and tucked it into a pocket.

“Who would send you a blank piece of parchment?” Neville asked, perplexed.

Monty shrugged, not knowing what to say. He was glad that whatever spell Harry had come up with had worked, so that only they could see what the other had written. It would have been hard to explain why he cared that Harry was in the hospital wing. Him being in the infirmary did not match with him being *fine*. Monty hadn’t seen Harry at breakfast, and had assumed the older boy was in the library. Apparently not.

“I should’ve skived off,” Monty said, propping his head on a hand again. Monty liked History of Magic well enough, the subject if not how Binns taught it via an unending stream of consciousness, but the class dragged interminably. It made him soporific. It felt like sabotage.

Monty was reminded of why he had gone to class when Binns asked them to turn in their essays.

“What are you going to do now?” Neville asked, glancing at the clock that seemed to tick slower than others.

“Drop my things off in our dormitory,” Monty said as he packed up. “Go to lunch. Confront my mortality. The usual.”

Neville choked on a laugh, then gave Monty a wounded look. “You’ve got to stop making jokes about dying. My nerves can’t take it.”

At this, Monty might have made himself elbow someone like Ron, or give them a light punch, but Neville didn’t appreciate those sorts of things. Nor did Monty, having been subjected to Dudley’s favorite pastime of Monty-mauling from an early age. Defending himself ended with him locked in the cupboard. Roughhousing always had a sinister edge to it, an underlying desire to cause real, permanent damage to the other person. Maybe that was why Monty couldn’t be friends with someone like Ron, who routinely got into playful fights with his brothers and sister, no harm done. The Dursleys had ruined him.

Monty left the History of Magic class in a hurry, only slowing once he noticed Neville puffing to keep up.

“Sorry,” he said, waiting at the top of a staircase as it swung around. “I’m a little on edge.”

“It’s fine,” Neville panted, clutching the railing for support. “There’s no way out of it, is there?”

“No,” Monty said, recalling something Harry had told him during one of their extreme training sessions. He really ought to have made the swooping evil bigger. “The only way out is through.”

Sitting through lunch only gave Monty's anxiety more time to grow. He closed his eyes to shut out the stares, the laughter, the shouts of encouragement, the jibes from the Slytherins.

Harry was not at lunch.

Monty opened his eyes again, taking slow, deep breaths, surreptitiously looking through the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws to where Harry's group of friends sat. They looked unruffled, eating their lunches with the refined indifference of the elite. Only Harry's best mate, Urquhart, showed any signs of distress. She had shaved her head completely bald, and had dark shadows under her eyes as if she hadn't slept. Urquhart wasn't eating, she only stared at an empty space where Harry might have sat. It reminded Monty of when Harry had been petrified by the basilisk, how feral with sadness and rage the older girl had been.

Harry must have told her about the dragons.

"Everything will be okay, Fleamont," Luna said quietly. Monty looked at her, the conviction in her moonlight eyes. She took his hand, and his heart nearly stopped. Her hand was dry and cool, and surprisingly comforting. "Harry is very smart."

"You should eat," Neville said. "It could be your last meal, right?" He tried laughing, but it sounded like he was being strangled.

Monty nodded, reluctantly letting go of Luna's hand to pick up his fork. He was surprised to find the house-elves had sent up fish and chips. Monty swallowed, stuck with the memory of him and Harry touring the chippies of London the summer before. Monty smiled to himself, then began to eat.

Hermione crashed into the table, her hair a frizzy, wild halo around her head, breathing heavily. "I've done it! I've compiled every single task ever reported on during a Triwizard Tournament."

Monty looked up at her in shock. "Hermione, that must have taken ages."

"That's not important," she said, shifting papers around frantically. "Now, for the First Task, it's usually some sort of creature. I think it's tradition. Of course, you already know about the cockatrice in 1792..."

Luna nudged him, and Monty went back to eating while Hermione frantically babbled. He was struck by how much effort and thought Hermione had put into it, despite him telling her repeatedly that he didn't need help. It was a little annoying that he hadn't been listened to, that she assumed he was totally unprepared, but it was such an incredibly thoughtful gesture that he forgave her.

"Ron's helped me, you know," she said in a rush. "He didn't want me to tell you, but he has."

Monty held his tongue, not wanting to ruin the moment by asking if Hermione had bullied him into it. He glanced down the table, where Ron was huddled amongst Fred and George. He was taller than both of them, and stood out despite hunching. Ron was the type who was better at actions than words, Monty knew that. He might not have understood why Monty

needed him to actually say he was sorry, that he wouldn't throw away three years of friendship over a tournament Monty hadn't wanted to be in.

"There are only so many magical creatures in the world," Hermione said, her thoughts moving faster than she could talk. "So they've reused some of them. Now, there's no time to learn new spells, but based on what you *do* know, well, I think we can come up with something!"

"I don't think there's time for that," Monty said, watching as Professor McGonagall descended from the head table. She hurried towards him, a look of consternation on her face. Monty noted Professor Snape was already gone. "You've really outdone yourself. Now I have a good idea of what I'm up against."

Hermione's lip trembled, and she roughly brushed tears away. "I believe in you, Monty."

Monty smiled at her, feeling guilty that she had gone to so much trouble to research something he already knew and had been preparing for since his name came out of the Goblet of Fire. But, if he had told Hermione about the dragons, she would have fixated on that, and he doubted he would have got any studying done at all.

Monty was not going to let the Triwizard Tournament take over his life. He worked hard for the grades he got. He knew his mum had been a prefect, and that his parents had been Head Boy and Head Girl. He had the pictures someone had sent him in first year. If his grades dropped, he'd have no chance of being a prefect like Harry.

"Potter," Professor McGonagall said as she drew alongside him. "I'll be taking you onto the grounds. You need to get ready for the First Task."

Monty set down his fork, surprised to see he had nearly cleared his plate, then stood to join her. Luna grabbed his hand again, and slipped something over his wrist.

"For luck," she said, smiling brightly at him.

Monty swallowed nervously. "Thanks."

"Good luck," Neville said, giving him a tremulous smile.

"You'll do great, Monty," Hermione said fiercely.

He nodded to them, smiled at the clapping and shouts of support from his housemates, then followed Professor McGonagall out of the Great Hall.

As they walked, Monty pushed up his sleeve to see what Luna had given him. It was a woven bracelet, made of silver, gold, and snowy white hairs that shimmered with iridescence.

Unicorn tail. Dozens of strands.

Luna had put a dragon's hoard around his wrist as if it were nothing. It was worth more than the prize for winning the tournament, several times over.

Professor McGonagall glanced at the bracelet, pursing her lips. “Lovegood must be sneaking into the Forbidden Forest again.”

“Sometimes the unicorns come out,” Monty said, letting his sleeve fall again. “And Luna’s a sleepwalker.”

“Don’t worry, Potter, I have no interest in giving Miss Lovegood detention today,” she said magnanimously. “There are more pressing matters at hand.”

They left the castle, stepping into the cold November air. The sky was an opaque dome of grey, and the grounds were eerily silent. Even Fang had quieted down, and the Whomping Willow was as still as a predator lying in wait.

As the castle disappeared from view, McGonagall placed her hand on his shoulder. “You’ve got to stay calm, Potter,” she said, not sounding very calm herself. “We have witches and wizards ready to step in if anything...if anything should happen. And I will be there, of course, the headmaster as well. The situation is under control.”

Monty nodded. He wished she would come out and tell him he was facing a dragon. He was tempted to tell her that Karkaroff and Maxime knew, and had probably told Krum and Delacour. Monty held back. It would get Hagrid in trouble, which would get Charlie in trouble, which would reflect poorly on Percy, and Harry wouldn’t appreciate that.

Professor McGonagall lapsed into silence as their walk stretched on. When they reached the tent hiding the dragon enclosure from view, she squeezed his shoulder, wished him luck, and walked away.

Monty took a breath. He was the master of his own mind. He knew what he was going to do. He was ready. He could not control the situation, but he could control his reaction to it. He was going to be fine.

Monty lifted the tent flap and stepped inside.

Harry looked up at the sound of the tent opening, glad to see his brother had arrived in one piece. Monty’s hair was a mess, but his jaw was set and his green eyes were bright. To anyone who didn’t know Harry’s brother, they might think he was angry. Harry, however, knew that this was what Monty looked like when he was extremely focused. He looked like that when he was going after the snitch, and when he was studying for exams. It was impressive how single-minded Monty could be, when he really wanted something.

Monty didn’t notice the sullen Hector Crumb where he lurked in one dark corner, nor Floor Della Core, who was perched on a stool, looking more pasty than pretty as she waited. He walked towards Harry

“You’re wearing muggle clothes?” Monty asked, frowning slightly

“They’re just clothes,” Harry said, glancing down at himself. Dragonhide boots, black trousers with only a few holes, a plain black shirt. “We’re making a statement, right?”

“Right,” Monty said.

Ludo Bagman, who had gone the whole hog and worn his old Wimbourne Wasps robes, spun around. “Monty! There you are!”

“Here I am,” Monty said snarkily.

“And here I remain,” Harry said, smirking at his brother.

“I haven’t finished reading *Dune*,” Monty said. “Don’t spoil it.”

“I’m not,” Harry said, rolling his eyes.

Bagman cleared his throat, looking bemused. “Now that we’re all here, it’s time to fill you in!”

Harry crossed his arms, listening as Bagman inelegantly danced around the fact there were four dragons waiting to roast them all alive. The task was to get a golden egg.

“So, essentially, I’m Veruca Salt,” Harry said. “I reckon we’re fighting geese? How much for a golden goose?”

Monty made a choked noise, while Bagman looked more confused than ever.

“Are they not for sale?” Harry asked.

“Ah,” Bagman said, pulling on his collar. “I’m afraid not, Mr. Evans.”

“What is this veruca salt?” Viktor asked, looking concerned.

“A treatment for verucas,” Harry said, while Monty shook with silent laughter. “They’re endemic around here. *Hogwarts*, you know?”

Fleur looked more unnerved by this than the dragons. “Is it contagious?”

“Only if you’re a bad egg,” Monty said, pulling himself together.

“Right, well,” Bagman said, realizing he was losing control of the situation. The purple silk bag he held was moving, bulging oddly at places. Harry was more curious about that bag than the entire Triwizard Tournament.

A few awkward minutes passed, and Harry had time to regret displaying any familiarity with Monty. He just wanted to make his brother feel better. He was lucky Bagman wasn’t the brightest, Viktor had little interest in other people, and that Fleur was only interested in

herself. At any rate, none would see the brief interaction he and his brother had as out of the ordinary. So Harry hoped.

He had to be more careful.

Soon, he heard people approaching. Hogwarts had emptied, and all the students walked past the tents in high spirits, looking forward to the show. Harry felt like one of the poor sods they made a gladiator. It didn't matter if he got hurt, what he killed, if he died, so long as he did it well.

"Sounds like they've all settled in," Bagman said brightly, his good mood recovered. He held out the silk bag, shaking it encouragingly at Fleur. "Ladies first!"

Fleur's hand trembled as she reached into the bag. Harry watched avidly as she pulled out a tiny, perfect model of a Common Welsh Green dragon. Viktor went next, taking out a Chinese Fireball. Neither seemed to appreciate how complicated, intricate, utterly genius the magic that had gone into those models was.

"You next, Mr. Evans," Bagman said, holding the bag out to him. Harry knew exactly what was inside of it, and he suppressed a smile. Things were already going better than planned.

Harry stuck his hand in, made a show of feeling around, then pulled out the remaining two models. A Swedish Short-Snout, and the Hungarian Horntail.

Bagman's smile faltered.

"Oops," Harry said, passing the Short-Snout to Monty, keeping the Horntail for himself. The Short-Snout was not half the size of the Horntail, who was baring her tiny fangs at Harry. It took Monty a moment to accept the model dragon. Monty looked at it, then up at Harry, his eyes going wide.

Harry smirked at him. "Looks like you're going first, Potter."

"Monty, mind if we have a quick word?"

Monty looked away from the Swedish Short-Snout he held, to where Bagman was gesturing at the entrance to the tent.

"Yeah," he said absently, slipping the model dragon into his pocket. He would have to thank Harry later. He looked back at the older boy, who was frowning. Monty shrugged, then followed Bagman outside, into a group of trees.

Something felt off, and Monty knew it was strange that Bagman had singled him out for a heart-to-heart. Harry hadn't looked pleased by it. He slowly reached into his robes, grasping his wand.

“So,” Bagman said, licking his lips nervously. “Dragons, eh? Exciting stuff.”

“I suppose,” Monty said.

“Rotten luck, going first,” Bagman said. “Wouldn’t have expected a fellow champion to pull a stunt like that! That’s muggleborns for you.”

Monty stared at him, not knowing what to say.

“And he’s a Slytherin to boot,” Bagman said, shaking his head ruefully. “Tricky sort, them. Best watch yourself around that one, Monty.”

“Right,” Monty said, not letting go of his wand.

“You know,” Bagman said, lowering his voice. He leaned closer to Monty. “When facing a larger opponent, they always say go for the eyes.”

“Yeah, make sense,” Monty said, wondering what the hell was happening.

“You get my meaning, Monty?” Bagman said, patting his shoulder. “*Go for the eyes*. There’s a little spell I like to use, called—”

A loud whistle blew, its piercing cry drowning Bagman’s words out.

“Oh, bother, I’ve got to run,” Bagman said, releasing Monty and hurrying out of the trees. “You’re up, Monty!” he shouted over his shoulder. “Just walk to the enclosure!”

Monty watched Bagman bumble away, relaxing. He let go of his wand, instead pulling a badge from his pocket and affixing it to his robes. He walked through the trees, following Bagman’s path. He wished he could see Harry before he went to meet his dragon, but Bagman had used up all his time. Feeling annoyed, and more than a little vindictive, Monty stepped through the gap in the enclosure.

“And here is our first and youngest champion!” Bagman’s voice boomed. Monty looked up at the judges’ seats, wondering how Bagman had got there so quickly. “Monty Potter!”

Monty stayed where he was, at the entrance to the enclosure. He could see the Swedish Short-Snout at the opposite end, curled around her eggs. She was the prettiest of the dragons, her scales pale as ice, with only the faintest hint of blue. Her eyes were two slits of silver, glaring at the noisy crowd as she turned her head, her tail lashing. More than the threat the dragons presented to the champions, Monty was upset they’d been uprooted while still nesting. She looked absolutely miserable, and he could see the desire in the flex of her wings to return to her mountain home. The mountains that ringed Hogwarts must have looked so tempting, yet instinct told her not to abandon her eggs.

The Swedish Short-Snout’s eggs were the loveliest Monty had ever seen. They were fine like porcelain, rosy with a teal tinge where the scales overlapped. Among them nestled a golden egg that looked so out of place Monty was surprised the dragon hadn’t ejected it from her clutch. The dragon’s bone-yellow claws rested close by, poised to defend her eggs.

“Looks like he’s got a bit of stage fright,” Bagman said good naturedly, his voice filling the enclosure and echoing off the stands. “Hold on, what’s that he’s got on?”

Monty shook his head, realizing he’d been admiring the dragon for too long. He had a task to complete. Since Bagman had asked, Monty obligingly held out the badge. He looked at the stands, trying to pick out his friends. Sirius was likely with Remus, who he had promised to tell the plan so he wouldn’t have to worry. Remus had enough going on, with the recent full moon and all.

Not finding anyone right away, Monty gave it up as a lost cause. He pointed his wand at his throat. “*Sonorus!*”

“Monty, lad, I’m the commentator here!” Bagman said.

“I’ve just got one thing to say,” Monty said, glad his voice was steady. He held out his S.P.E.W. badge again, hoping they got a good photograph. “House-elf rights!”

With his wand still pointed at his throat, Monty whispered, “*Quietus.*”

“House-elf rights?” Bagman repeated. “What’s he on about?”

“Kreacher,” Monty said, putting his wand away.

Kreacher instantly appeared at his side, hunched and scowling. His white ear hairs were brushed, his pillow case was a pristine black, the family crow-skull-wand crest worn proudly at the shoulder.

The people in the stands, who had been shouting since Monty stepped foot into the enclosure, made noises of confusion. He could hear one person with a harsh, barking sort of laugh, and smiled to himself.

“He’s...I...” Bagman spluttered. “Well, this is a surprising turn of events!”

“Young Master called?” Kreacher said sourly, not acknowledging the house-sized dragon a hundred feet from them.

“Could you fetch that golden egg for me?” Monty asked.

Kreacher sighed wearily then snapped his fingers. The golden egg rose from the others and raced towards them. Kreacher caught it in his gnarled hands, then bowed as he presented it to Monty.

“Cheers,” Monty said, accepting the golden egg. “You can go.”

Kreacher bowed again, even lower and more mocking than before, then vanished.

The stadium was dead silent, save Sirius’ laughter.

“And he’s done it!” Bagman finally exclaimed. “Monty Potter’s got the egg!”

The crowd reluctantly began to applaud. There was, however, a considerable group of Slytherins who began loudly booing and swearing. Monty didn't care. They told him to get the egg, he got the bloody egg.

Not knowing what else to do, Monty turned around to leave the enclosure. He nearly collided with Professor McGonagall, who had a pinched look about her.

"I suppose you won't be needing the first-aid tent," she said drily, shaking her head. "I should have expected you had a trick up your sleeve, knowing your father. Always up to something. Well, let's have Madam Pomfrey check you over while the judges deliberate."

Monty had forgotten he was being scored, and looked over his shoulder. A group of dragon-keepers were slowly approaching the Swedish Short-Snout. Relieved he hadn't been forced to hurt her, Monty followed Professor McGonagall to a second tent. Once inside, Madam Pomfrey looked him up and down, handed him a mug of cocoa, and told him to sit quietly.

A few moments later, Luna skipped in, trailed by a shaking Neville.

"Hello, Fleamont," she said.

"Hello, Luna," he replied. He took a sip of cocoa, surprised at how much warmer it made him feel.

"I didn't know you had a house-elf," Neville said.

"He's not mine," Monty said. "I asked him if he wanted to help."

It had been a rather awkward conversation, asking Sirius to speak to Kreacher, asking Kreacher to decide if he wanted to take orders from Monty. Monty wasn't entirely comfortable with the whole thing, but it was Harry's idea. He could call Kreacher right into his dormitory, and the house-elf's magic found a way to comply. Kreacher was a critical element of *Plan: Steal an Egg*, or whatever Harry had called it.

Luna smiled admiringly at the egg. "I wonder what's inside?"

Monty half-expected Hermione to show up as well, but no one else entered the tent.

Neville saw him looking and grimaced. "She's not happy."

"Yeah, I didn't think she would be," Monty said. He took another sip of cocoa, closing his eyes as its warmth banished the chill that had settled over him.

It was over.

"Potter!" Professor McGonagall called from outside the tent.

Monty passed his unfinished cocoa to Luna, who cradled the mug between her hands and took a sip, then walked out to receive his scores.

“Monty Potter’s got the egg!”

Harry looked up from *Wand Woods of Wales*, biting back his amusement at his brother having completed the First Task in just over a minute. Fleur looked stricken, while Viktor’s scowl deepened. Harry lifted his book again, hiding his smile at the crowd’s mixed reaction. As if he would let his little brother be used for their bloodsport. They already got enough of that when Monty played quidditch.

“And now the marks from the judges!”

Harry went back to his book. It had an entire chapter dedicated to blackthorn. Such wands were drawn to warriors, those who truly felt alive in the heat of battle.

“What did he mean by *house-elf rights*?” Viktor asked him, having slouched a full lap around the tend.

“Exactly that, I imagine,” Harry said, turning a page. “One of his mates, Hermione Granger, has an organization dedicated to the promotion of house-elf welfare.”

“She does?” Viktor asked, just as the whistle blew again.

“Miss Delacour, if you please?” Bagman's amplified voice said.

Though she was shaking, and white as a sheet, Fleur stood and walked out of the tent without a backwards glance.

Viktor began another circuit around the tent. Harry had noticed him doing the same around the library, and was glad for the excuse to stay in the Restricted Section. Trying to read with so many of Viktor’s fans talking, giggling, and following Viktor around, was tiresome. Silencing charms didn't stop them from constantly circling, bumping into shelves, knocking off books. Madam Pince had her hands full.

Bagman’s voice was also tiresome. He was not giving a proper play-by-play commentary, not wanting to give the other champions hints, but only vocalizing his reactions to whatever Fleur was doing.

“Why did you give Potter the Short-Snout?” Viktor asked, having returned.

“Why *didn't* you tell him we were up against dragons?” Harry asked, turning another page. “You’re in the library every day, surely you’ve had the opportunity.”

Viktor scowled and stalked away to lurk in a corner. Harry rolled his eyes. Anyone who had not helped Monty was on his shitlist, and that included almost all of the professors. That Hagrid and Trelawney had been the only ones to give his brother any sort of warning was appalling. Harry knew his dad trusted him to see to his brother, so Harry excused his lack of intervention. The others could die in a fire for all he cared.

Karkaroff and Maxime had no such scruples; both Fleur and Viktor had been entirely unsurprised to see the model dragons. McGonagall had led her student, the Boy Who Lived, to a slaughterhouse with four nesting dragons and hadn't said a single thing. Respecting the sanctity of the tournament was more important than Monty's life, or some other bullshit.

Harry closed his book, no longer interested in reading. His brother was safe, until the second task. He had to focus on battling his own monster.

"We'll need to add a new rule, Weasley," Mr. Crouch said, watching as Fleur Delacour walked away with her egg, dousing her burning robe with an *aguamenti*. He made a note on her rubric. Mr. Crouch had one for each champion, both extensive and thorough. Percy was impressed by how nuanced it was. Elocution, posture, accuracy, strength of spell, duration of spell, on and on. Monty Potter had only cast two spells, and had got full marks on both.

"Yes, sir," Percy said, writing down his own note. *No house-elves*. He was in the esteemed position of standing behind Mr. Crouch in the judge's stand, with an excellent view of the entire enclosure. When Delacour returned to receive her score, Percy dutifully wrote the numbers down under Monty's. Monty had unsurprisingly got a full ten points from Mr. Crouch, ten points from Mr. Bagman, eight points from Professor Dumbledore, three from Professor Karkaroff, and six from Madame Maxime. Monty had not been very interested in the scores, preoccupied with speaking to his friends Neville and Luna. Ron and Hermione were conspicuously absent.

Monty was not a willing participant, which people seemed to keep forgetting.

Delacour received six, eight, seven, five, and ten respectively. The bias from certain parties was astounding, but Percy understood both Krum and Delacour were at a disadvantage so far from home. Percy was proud to see Hogwarts students still cheering for them.

Percy raised his quill as Viktor Krum walked into the enclosure. He frowned in dismay as Krum immediately shot a Conjunctivitis Curse into the Chinese Fireball's eyes. The dragon roared in agony, her eyes swelling shut and oozing a rancid yellow mucus.

Mr. Crouch frowned slightly as the dragon thrashed around, roaring and spewing flames, her wings splayed out, panicking in her blindness, desperate to defend her eggs. Her movements were too wild, and with a heartbreaking *crack* one of the eggs was crushed.

In the crowd, Percy heard Hagrid shout, "No!"

Mr. Crouch's lips thinned, and he made a sharp mark on Krum's rubric.

Percy knew that damage to the eggs was a risk. The dragon-keepers knew as well. Nevertheless, it was sad to see. The dragon reared back, clearly aware she was destroying her

own eggs and afraid of crushing them all. Krum raced forward to seize the undamaged golden egg.

Percy frowned at Krum's total score, but he didn't have time to dwell on it. The Chinese Fireball had to be stunned and dragged back to her cage, one dragon-keeper staying behind to gather the few intact eggs. Several minutes later, the Hungarian Horntail's eggs were carried in, a half dozen eggs the size and color of small boulders. The dragon-keepers cleared out once her cage was in position. It was flush with an opening in the wall, and at a signal the front bars of the gate vanished. The Horntail charged out, running straight to her eggs with frightening speed at odds with her size. Percy almost wished he had stayed to meet the dragons as Charlie had offered. It would have prepared him from how mind bogglingly massive the Horntail was.

Harry was the last champion. He was facing the Horntail.

Percy's heart stuttered, then began to beat wildly as the wall was restored. The whistle blew again, summoning Harry to the enclosure.

"How did you get up here?" Sirius asked.

Monty grinned at him, glad no one had the bollocks to sit next to Sirius Black in the front row.

"Monty, aren't you supposed to be resting?" Remus asked from Sirius' other side.

"I wanted to see the other champions," Monty said. "I was watching with Neville and Luna from the ground, but I wanted a better look."

"Where's your egg?" Sirius asked.

Monty patted his robes. "Pocket. Look, they're bringing in the Horntail."

"The what?" Remus asked, alarmed.

Sirius leaned back in his seat as the Hungarian Horntail charged out of her cage, her movements shaking the stands. "Bad luck for Evans, but I'm glad it wasn't you up against her."

"No, he picked it," Monty said, craning forward to look at the narrow entrance to the enclosure. "Look, there he is!"

Severus watched as his only child stepped into a flimsy wooden enclosure containing the largest extant breed of dragon. He fingered his wand, his eyes returning to the beast. If the creature so much as *looked* at his son the wrong way—

There was a loud crinkling sound, and he turned to see Charity Burbage opening a bag of pickle flavored crisps. The smell of dill was overpowering.

“What’s he doing?” she said, munching on several. “Why’re you looking at me like that? Want some?” She held the bag out to him, shaking it a little. A few crumbs landed on his robes.

Severus shook his head, released his wand, then looked back to see what his son had been planning all month.

Harry looked at the dragon in his hand, smiling as her little spiked tail swung around. He touched her head, whispering, “*Dormio.*” The model sagged, the dragon curling up reflexively. Harry put the model in his pocket, not wanting it to get damaged during the fight.

When the final whistle blew, Harry stood and left the tent. It wasn’t a long walk, just through a group of trees, but it gave him time to quiet his thoughts again. He knew not many people were looking forward to seeing him in action, other than his fellow Slytherins. He wasn’t the Boy Who Lived, or an internationally renowned quidditch player, or a beautiful girl. He was just a poor, no name kid from Cokeworth.

Harry made himself uncross his arms before walking into the enclosure. He paused at the entrance, taking in the makeshift stadium. The stands encircled the enclosure, rising high in the air, packed with hundreds of people. The crowd was oddly silent, and the cause of this was evident. On the other side of the enclosure, lowered menacingly over her eggs, was a Hungarian Horntail.

Harry began walking forward, across the hard packed dirt, dust and pebbles kicked up under foot. It was a barren wasteland of an enclosure, though parts of it had been carved out by the previous dragons and their champions.

The Hungarian Horntail watched his approach, her cruel yellow eyes never leaving him. Her hide was completely black, the color so profound the details of her scales were nearly indiscernible. She was over fifty feet tall, the size of two houses stacked together. Harry had no other means of comparison, other than a whale. He had never seen a whale. They were too large to exist on land.

Even crouched, the Horntail dwarfed him. Her tail was nearly as long as her body, and fully extending she could reach him from halfway across the enclosure. As it was, her tail was busy lashing back and forth, huge, viciously sharp spikes in gleaming bronze cutting deep

gouges into the hard earth. Each spike was as tall as Harry. If any hit him the wrong way, he would be dead in an instant.

As he slowly approached her, his sense of her sheer enormity grew. Nature simply did not produce animals that large, but she was no mundane animal. She was a dragon, a creature created from magics so ancient even their oldest written records held not an iota of their origin.

The Horntail bared her fangs, yellowed with age, honed to fatal points through time, her hot, fetid breath rushing out. Smoke trickled from her nostrils as they flared, picking up his scent. The musky stench of snake rolled off of her. She was a nesting mother. She had no time to groom herself, and had likely not eaten for months. She was hungry, scared for her eggs, agitated by the noise of the crowd, from being drugged and taken hundreds of miles from home. She had been potioned, stunned, chained, dragged, and now a strange, small creature was approaching her eggs. Despite her colossal size, she viewed Harry as a threat.

When Harry reached the halfway point, the Horntail slammed a massive clawed foot onto the ground, growling in warning. Harry could feel the rumble of it through the earth. It made his teeth rattle.

Harry stood there for a moment, waiting to see if she would leave her eggs to attack him. The Horntail lowered her giant head. He was just outside of her fire breathing range, but nascent flames hissed through her fangs, her mouth glowing the deep red of some sinister forge.

He raised his empty hand, his eyes never leaving the Horntail.

“Is...is he forfeiting?” Bagman asked, his voice further irritating the Horntail. Her eyes narrowed. She must have associated Bagman's voice with the other dragons roaring. She was fearsomely intelligent, which only made matters worse.

Harry didn't respond, simply waited. The crowd began muttering, though he clearly heard Astrid shout, “Beat the dragon shit out of her, Haz!”

“Shut up, Astrid,” Harry muttered, smiling faintly at the *whoosh* of what he had summoned finally arriving.

The vial smacked into his hand, and Harry's fingers closed reflexively around it.

“I spoke too soon!” Bagman said. “Let's see where he goes with this!”

Harry uncorked the vial, the familiar scents of lavender and mint stinging his nose. Harry downed the Calming Draught in one swallow. He licked his lips, grinning as Astrid loudly demanded to know what he had just taken. Then he started to run.

“What is that boy doing?” Bagman shouted. “Son, you don't even have your wand out!”

Harry sprinted flat out the Hungarian Horntail, his eyes darting around to catch every twitch of her muscles. Her head pulled back just as her tail lifted. Harry flung the vial towards her tail, wordlessly summoning his wand from his pocket to his hand. He aimed at the vial as it

spun through the air, almost invisible save for the light glinting off of it. With a thought, the vial grew to a massive size, unfolding like a crystal flower. It was spelled unbreakable, all of his dad's vials were. Her tail crashed into it in a deafening ring, the spikes glancing off the impenetrable glass. Harry bit the cork between his teeth, drawing up just as the Horntail opened her mouth. Flames fountained out in a blinding, scorching deluge, the ground blackening and cracking with the intense heat.

"Pestilentia glaciatum," Harry mumbled, bracing himself against the brutal, glacial cyclone that surged out of his wand, icy white tendrils piercing through the dragon fire. The flames never reached him, even as more poured out of the Horntail's mouth. They froze solid, Harry's spell reaching up to frost the dragon's muzzle in a fine tracery of ice. She reared back, snapping her neck to try to free herself. Her tail swung around again, and Harry dropped to the ground. It nearly grazed him, before crashing into the column of ice. The ice shattered, breaking into infinitely many shards that hung in the air. Harry spat the cork out, then summoned the disk of unbreakable glass to himself. The tail swung back, ricocheting off of it.

He aimed at the cork, forcing it to enlarge to the size of a small giant.

"Nishtani golem," he said, pushing himself up. The giant cork rippled and bulged, forming arms, legs, even a simple head though it didn't need one. The Horntail's paw swung out of the haze. *"Piertotum locomotor!"*

The cork giant leapt to life, flinging itself at the Horntail's claws. It was incredibly light, and the Horntail could easily knock it aside. But her terrible claws sunk into the cork golem, piercing it through.

"Deadlic gewhit!" he shouted. The cork golem crashed into the ground, nearly throwing Harry from his feet, making a deep crater with its now tremendous weight. The tail came around again. Frustrated, Harry ran towards the eggs. The air was heating up, the Horntail preparing to wash the entire enclosure in her infernal flames.

The ice was still hovering in the air, a coruscating, freezing mist. It was dark magic, and would not melt until Harry willed it to.

"Faciatus compedes!" Harry shouted. The particles of ice rushed past him, compacting into thick, frigid chains that fell heavily to the ground. *"Fuck. Fulgari!"*

The flames seething from the dragon's mouth writhed, condensing into burning ropes that wrapped themselves around her snout, trapping her flames. She violently convulsed, and Harry was momentarily struck with horror at the size of this raging behemoth rising above him. He had no time to dwell on it, snapping his wand towards the icy chains, directing them to wrap around the dragon. The bloody tail was coming back *again*, and Harry was tempted to cut the damn thing off. The dragon was struggling against her foot trapped in the ground, the ropes around her muzzle, straining against chains so cold they froze her inviolable scales. The chains kept contracting around her, and it was sending the dragon into a panic.

Grimacing, Harry darted forward to retrieve the golden egg, glad to see none of the Horntail's had been harmed. He ran back to the other side of the enclosure, whispering counter charms,

dispelling the hellish ice, vanishing the cracked shield the vial had become. That gave him pause. The Horntail was strong enough to have cracked glass charmed unbreakable by his own father.

Harry let out a shaky breath. Percy had wanted him to show off. Unless Harry opened his veins and started writing runes in his own blood, he wasn't sure how much more he *could* have shown off.

When the dragon was free of her bonds, ripping her trapped foreleg from the earth, she gave an ear-splitting cry that drowned out the noise from the crowd, and Bagman's shouting.

Harry blinked, not realizing he had been ignoring them all. Shaking the remaining ice from his hair, he left the enclosure, the cheering crowd, and his dragon behind.

Suck an Egg

Chapter Summary

November 1994

First Task, continued

Chapter Notes

I'm so relieved you guys like the previous chapter. I was worried it would suck. Anyway, he's another longish one. A double chapter?

“And here is our fourth champion, Harry Evans!”

Percy could not tear his eyes away from Harry as he slowly walked across the enclosure. He was in muggle garments, simple and all black. The unassuming muggleborn who never quite fit into magical society.

The judges' seats were directly behind the dragon, the monstrous bulk of the Hungarian Horntail. She was already poised to strike out at any who dared approach. Harry looked like he was on a stroll through the park, heedless of the shouting Astrid Urquhart, the Slytherin gobstones team's banner with the absurd yet threatening message of *Get Stoned*. The rest of the students in audience waited curiously to see what one of their prefects was capable of.

Harry stopped right in the middle of the enclosure, his attention fixed on the Horntail. She issued a low, menacing growl that shook the very earth itself, one paw striking the ground in defense of her eggs. Dragon fire sparked to life in her mouth, flames dripping from her fangs.

Harry raised his hand. It took Percy a split second to understand what he was doing.

“Is...is he forfeiting?” Mr. Bagman said, his thoughts echoed by the majority of the crowd. They had been disappointed by Monty Potter's performance, and to them it seemed Hogwarts would have a poor showing all around.

There was a faint cry of, “He's not forfeiting you fucking idiot!” from one of the Slytherins, and more loudly, “Kick the dragon shit out of her, Haz!” Harry's lips moved, though he was too far away to make out any of his words. Moments later, Percy spotted it, hurtling through the entrance to the enclosure, from the direction of the first-aid tent.

Harry easily caught the vial.

“I spoke too soon!” Mr. Bagman said, looking relieved that there would be no forfeiting. “Let’s see where he goes with this!”

Harry drank the contents of the vial, his eyes never leaving the Horntail.

“Now, what potion was that?” Mr. Bagman said. “A kind of flame resistance?”

Percy knew what it was. He was intimately familiar with the scent that hung around Harry. The champions had been told they could only bring a wand, and it was common sense that one had to summon any other tools.

Harry dropped his arms, still holding the vial, and licked his lips. Percy’s breath caught as Harry smiled. Then he started to run, straight at an enraged, fifty-six foot, hundred ton, Hungarian Horntail.

Mr. Bagman leaned forward, gripping the rail. “What is that boy doing?” he shouted. “Son, you don’t even have your wand out!”

Percy’s body seized with terror. Harry looked so small, a speck of black racing towards an unrelenting mass. The Horntail dwarfed him. He put a hand over his mouth, overcome with fear. Harry could die. He could die, and it would be Percy’s fault for putting him up to this.

The crowd was screaming, shouting at Harry to stop, to turn around, no one comprehending why Harry was meeting such a gargantuan, lethal creature head on, running unswervingly to his death.

“The boy’s lost his mind,” Mr. Bagman said. “The Horntail’s lifted her tail...”

Harry pulled his arm back and threw something at the dragon. The vial. Percy tried to watch its flight, but it was too small to see. Then Harry’s wand appeared in his hand as if it had always been there, and he pointed in the direction the vial had flown. It was all happening so quickly that Percy could hardly keep up, and Mr. Bagman was struggling to narrate. With a bright flash a shimmering, crystal disk blossomed in the air, unfurling to catch the thin autumn sunlight. The tail completed its arc, bronze spikes squealing against the glass. It was unbreakable, all the school’s potions vials were. The tail whipped backward, and the crystal shield spun across the enclosure, slicing into the ground.

“Good lord, she’s going to breathe!” Mr. Bagman shouted.

Percy’s heart pounded in his chest. Harry had stopped in the dreadful shadow of the beast, his wand pointed at the Horntail’s head. He put something in his mouth, but Percy barely noticed. The dragon was arching her neck, her hateful yellow eyes fixated on Harry, on this comparatively diminutive human holding a fragile stick.

“That’s not a good spot to be in,” Mr. Bagman said inanely.

Blistering flames surged out of the Horntail, violent red and orange goutts that lashed and billowed from her mouth, the heat so intense Percy could feel it from where he stood. It

sucked all of the air from the stadium. Harry stood in the path of the dragon fire, unmoving.

Just as the flames began to engulf Harry, a stream of dense white haze surged from his wand, spreading like roots through the dragon fire, freezing it in place. Vapor coursed from it in chilling waves, and Percy shuddered. His own breath came out in a mist.

“Good lord,” Mr. Bagman breathed. “I didn’t know a Flame-Freezing Charm could do that!”

“That’s no Flame-Freezing Charm,” Professor Karkaroff said in a low voice. Percy didn’t spare him a thought, watching as the Horntail struggled to free herself from the ice now growing around her muzzle, the rime reaching towards her madly rolling eyes. The flames had frozen completely solid, every tendril and wisp perfectly captured in ice. Not able to break away from the ice, the Horntail swung her massive, savagely spiked tail towards the pillar of glacial flames. Towards Harry.

Harry dropped to the ground, the spikes mere inches from his head before shattering the ice. Percy was mesmerized by the countless, miniscule shards of ice, glimmering like some interstellar cloud in the air. It was beautiful.

Harry suddenly reached his free hand out, and with a *crack* the crystal disk was torn from the earth, spinning towards him in a blur, intercepting the tail as it whipped back. Percy hadn’t even seen it move. The spikes screeched against the unbreakable glass, and the dragon roared her fury.

Still on the ground, Harry spat something out. He pointed his wand at it, and it grew at an insane speed. It was the cork, swelling to an immense size. Harry’s wand was still aimed at it, and for the first time Percy could clearly hear the spell he cast, the words almost lost in the dragon’s fury.

“*Nishtani golem.*”

“And now he’s done something—”

People were screaming. Her flame and tail thwarted, the Horntail finally lifted one of the feet protecting her eggs. Her foreleg punched out.

“*Piertotum locomotor!*”

Claws longer than Harry’s arms punctured the cork golem, but it was too light to stop the movement. Harry was responding so quickly to the dragon that Mr. Bagman spluttered nonsense. They could only watch. Amazingly, the crystal disk rose again, crashing into the tail from above, the spikes driving into the earth.

“*Deadlic gewhit!*”

The golem crashed into the ground with the force of a meteor, yanking the Horntail forward. Her foreleg was trapped in the earth, and she screamed like a dying animal. Fire flickered to life, deep in her outstretched throat.

Harry had pushed himself up, a solitary black figure in the scintillating, icy mist that was somehow still in the air.

“Faciatus compedes!”

Percy stood in awe as the mist shifted, swirled, coalesced into heavy chains of ice. They crashed into the ground, at which Harry swore. He pointed his wand at the Horntail’s head as she pulled back to immolate him once more. *“Fulgari!”*

Golden light washed over the Horntail’s fire, twisting it into fiery ropes that wrapped themselves around her snout, snapping her mouth shut. Black smoke pumped out of her nostrils, and her head moved towards Harry with the speed of a striking snake. But Harry was still casting spells, and the icy chains rose from the ground, outpacing the dragon, wrapping around her neck, her legs, her chest, tightening, pulling her to the ground. Rime grew along her pitch black scales in intricate crystals. She let out an awful groan, straining against her binds. Her tail rose again, the spikes flashing in the light, but was slapped down by the crystal disk at a wave of Harry’s hand.

Having secured the dragon, Harry ran the rest of the way to her eggs, between the ancient trunks of her forelegs, one of which she was trying desperately to tear from the ground.

“And he’s got it!” Mr. Bagman cried as Harry appeared from under the Horntail’s massive, heaving chest. “Evans has got the egg!”

Carrying the golden egg, Harry jogged back to the entrance of the enclosure. The crowd was screaming and shouting their approval. Harry paused, turning back to the Hungarian Horntail. He tucked the egg under one arm, raising his wand, his mouth moving rapidly. Percy couldn’t hear him, but he saw the chains of ice burst into millions of crystals once more, then fade away. The ropes of flame burned away, and the Horntail opened her mouth in a piercing bellow. Her foreleg was finally torn from the earth, clods of dirt and rocks flying out. The crystal disk, still holding her tail off, vanished into thin air.

“I don’t think any of us expected that,” Mr. Bagman said, wiping his sweat away with a sleeve.

Percy only had eyes for Harry. Harry, who was putting his wand back into his pocket, carrying a golden egg under one arm, shaking icy crystals from his dark hair. Percy was captivated. He wanted Harry, more than he had ever wanted anything else in his entire life.

“And now, the judges will deliberate,” Mr. Bagman said, muttering a *quietus* and sitting back down. “Great Scott,” he said, beaming at the other judges. “I’ve never seen anything quite like that!”

Harry was at the entrance to the enclosure, being greeted by Madam Pomfrey. She hustled him out of sight.

“I dare say not,” Professor Dumbledore said pensively, his fingers laced together. He was gazing at where Harry had disappeared.

Charlie was the first dragon-keeper in the enclosure, shaking his head at the unscathed Hungarian Horntail.

“Not a scratch on him!” Mr. Bagman continued.

“Your student is quite impressive, Dumbledore,” Karkaroff said, a strange light in his eyes.

“You don’t say,” Mr. Bagman said. “Freezing dragon fire! In all my days... You said it wasn’t a Flame-Freezing Charm?”

Karkaroff scoffed. “Charm? No, Bagman. That was the Wraithrime Curse.”

“What?” Mr. Bagman asked.

Percy stiffened. He had never heard the name, but that Karkaroff had did not bode well.

“Wraithrime,” Karkaroff repeated. “You have heard of Fiendfyre, yes?”

Mr. Bagman looked startled. “That, ah, is the dangerous one?”

“Yes,” Karkaroff said drily. “It is very dangerous. Extremely difficult to control.” He gave Dumbledore a piercing look. “I’m surprised a Hogwarts student is capable of its antithesis.”

“Mr. Evans is one of our best students,” Dumbledore said. “Indeed, he is the most exceptional student I have seen in quite some time. To have that amount of control over such a dark spell at his age...”

“The type of spell is irrelevant,” Mr. Crouch said, almost resentfully. “Just as our rules did not ban the use of house-elves, we did not ban dark magic. Krum himself used a curse on the Fireball.”

Dumbledore inclined his head, though he looked oddly concerned. Had it really been such a dark spell?

“If he is so *exceptional*,” Madame Maxime interjected, “why did he not get the egg sooner?”

Karkaroff laughed. “The boy was showing off!”

“It would seem so,” Dumbledore said softly.

“Let’s run through it, shall we?” Bagman said eagerly.

“Agreed, Ludo,” Mr. Crouch said, tapping Harry’s rubric. “I’ve got it all down here.”

Percy edged forward to see how Mr. Crouch had marked Harry.

“Wandless and wordless Summoning Charm. A potion the boy presumably brewed himself, effect unknown...”

Percy held his tongue. There was no need for them to know it was a Calming Draught. Mr. Crouch kept listing the spells Harry had used, a ridiculous amount for how quickly his

encounter with the Hungarian Horntail had ended. Only Monty had been faster in retrieving his egg.

“What’s a golem?” Mr. Bagman asked.

“An autonomous transfiguration,” Dumbledore replied. “Not something in our curriculum, unless Minvera has made changes I am unaware of. Normally a golem would act on its own, but Mr. Evans took control of it.”

“And this student, he is a sixth-year?” Madame Maxime asked.

“The youngest in his class, I believe,” the headmaster said.

“Well, I thought he was brilliant,” Bagman said, slapping his legs. “It’s a ten from me!” Bagman laughed. “I’ll bet he picked the Horntail on purpose, just to have more of a challenge!”

“The only mark against Evans,” Mr. Crouch said, “is his apparent choice to delay retrieving the golden egg.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I did say the Triwizard Tournament is intended to test their magical prowess.”

“There’s no question the kid’s got that in spades,” Bagman said. “And what was that you said, Barty? Daring, courage in the face of the unknown...”

“Yes, Ludo,” Mr. Crouch said. “I think we can agree Evans demonstrated both to satisfaction.”

There was some more discussion, and Percy listened fervently as Harry's spellwork was picked over. He was magnificent, he was brave, he was brilliant, he was absolutely astounding. Harry, no matter what he said, was not someone to overlook. He had been chosen, after all.

It was all Percy could do to not run to him.

“We’re decided, then?” Mr. Bagman said, standing up. “Alright, let’s call him back in.”

Harry walked back into the enclosure, his stomach sloshing with Calming Draughts. Madam Pomfrey had refused to accept he didn’t need. His body was fine, perfectly quiescent.

The stands exploded with cheers and applause, but Harry focused on the judges. His entire field of view had been consumed by the Horntail, and he hadn’t seen Percy standing among them. His pulse quickened. Percy looked so prim and proper in his unwrinkled dark blue

robes, his soft, red curls neatly parted, his glasses polished, holding a clipboard and looking every inch the bureaucrat.

In front of Percy sat the five, far less interesting, judges, reclining on seats draped in golden silk. Harry quietly watched them, ignoring how the entire student body was losing its collective shit.

Madame Maxime was the first to raise her wand, a ribbon of silver rising out to form a nine. Mr. Crouch was next, two ribbons slipping out of his wand to form a ten. Harry did not look at Percy, not wanting to give anything away. He didn't know when Percy was leaving Hogwarts, but he wanted a chance to say goodbye.

Professor Dumbledore was next. He had a curiously neutral expression when he raised his wand. Harry's eyes were drawn to it, his mind running through all the wand woods he knew. It looked like nothing he had seen before, other than in the headmaster's hands. From this wand emerged the number nine. Ludo Bagman was next, beaming as two green ribbons wriggled from his wand forming a ten.

Harry looked at Karkaroff, who was watching him with covetous eyes. His wand was almost grudging when it forced out the number eight.

Harry quickly did the maths. Forty-six points. Not bad.

There was a triumphant scream, and Harry turned to see a completely bald Astrid punch Adrian in the face and jump out of the stands.

"Shit," he said. He had no time to get his wand. He dropped the golden egg and held his hands out toward Astrid as she plummeted through the air. "*Arresto momentum!*"

Heart racing, Harry sprinted towards her. Astrid had slowed considerably down, and Harry slid to a stop under her, catching her in his arms. She wasn't a tall girl, but she was dense with muscle, and his knees buckled under her weight.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" he demanded as she slid onto the ground.

Astrid picked him up like he weighed nothing, and began swinging him around. "You did it, you rare loon! First place!"

"Really?" Harry asked, grimacing as Astrid planted a sloppy kiss on his cheek.

"Miss Urquhart!"

Professor McGonagall was storming across the enclosure. "While I appreciate your enthusiasm for your friend, Evans needs to get to the champions' tent for instructions."

"Oh, piss off," Astrid muttered, setting Harry down. "You're mental. Terence shat himself. Pheeb's is dead to the world, she fainted straight away."

"You lost your hair," Harry pointed out.

“Ah, well,” Astrid said, rubbing her shorn head. “It was bound to happen.”

“Ten points from Slytherin,” Professor McGonagall said, clutching her chest. “For nearly giving me a heart attack, you foolish girl!”

Astrid pulled back at her tone, her expression conflicted. “I...”

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes, releasing a breath. “And twenty points for catching her, Mr. Evans. I swear, Astrid, you are going to be the death of me! Now, get back to your housemates. Evans, to the tent, go on with you!”

Harry looked at Astrid, who was staring at Professor McGonagall with wide eyes. He felt like he was intruding on something, so he gave Astrid a nudge to get her moving. She backed away, then turned to hurry to the stands. Harry tried summoning the golden egg, but it didn’t work. He went to retrieve it, brushed it off, and began walking back to the tents.

Severus’ first thought when his only, and consequently favorite, child ran headfirst at the dragon, was that he never should have bought Harry that skateboard. However, once he understood Harry’s motives, Severus crossed his arms and smugly watched his son put the dragon in her place.

“Bloody hell,” Charity said, her dill pickle crisps forgotten. Where the woman had acquired such a delicacy, Severus could not apprehend. “Kid’s got some moves.”

Severus huffed at the understatement.

“And he’s got muggle clothes on,” she added. “He’s not fucking about, is he? God, I wish he was in Muggle Studies!”

There was a moment that gave him pause. He was not aware Harry had taught himself such dark magic. Wraithrime was as dangerous as Fiendfyre, moreso given its insidious nature. It was more subtle, less overtly threatening than a conflagration made of deadly creatures born of flame. However, Harry had not quite mastered the Wraithrime; it remained as an amorphous mist.

Severus smiled to himself as one of his transfigured potion vials deflected yet another blow from the dragon’s spiked tail. He was surprised it had lasted so long.

Fascinated by his son, *his* son, displaying such mastery over magic, Severus reached for the bag of crisps.

Monty was on the edge of his seat, watching in awe as Harry went head-to-head with a Hungarian Horntail.

“Merlin, that kid’s got a pair,” Sirius said, just as excited. Harry had frozen dragon fire. Monty had seen a lot of magic since starting at Hogwarts, but he had never even imagined what Harry was doing. “That’s why I said not to get on his bad side, Remus.”

“Believe me,” Remus said, also entranced as Harry made some sort of giant out of cork. “I knew he was holding back in class. I suppose I didn’t know exactly how much.”

Monty gasped as the shield crashed into the tail again with a sickening *crack*, fracturing. Sirius winced.

“That’s unbreakable glass,” he said. “She’s strong. You said Evans picked her himself?”

“Yeah,” Monty said, practically falling out of his seat. “He gave me the Short-Snout.”

Remus and Sirius exchanged a look, but Monty was too mesmerized by the chains of ice forming out of the light fog that had enveloped both Harry and the dragon.

Sirius noticed it, and let out a low whistle. “I thought *I* was good at transfiguration. Is it normal to feel emasculated right now?”

“I’ve never seen an ice conjuration do that before,” Remus said as crystalline tendrils of frost spread across the Horntail’s black scales. It reminded Monty of a mammoth trapped in ice.

“That’s not normal ice,” Sirius said, frowning slightly. “This is mental. You know how hard Fiendfyre is to control.”

Remus hesitated, then said, “I do. I needed help dispelling it.”

Sirius leaned back, throwing an arm around Monty’s shoulders. “No sixteen year old should have that amount of self-control. It’s uncanny.”

“It’s Harry,” Monty said defensively, not really following. He hadn’t heard of Fiendfyre before.

Monty was glad for Sirius’ arm, else he would have leapt out of his seat with everyone else when Harry got the golden egg. He was also glad the ice, whatever it was, melted and hadn’t seemed to hurt the Horntail. She was mad, and was letting everyone know that as she bellowed and spat flames, but unharmed. All of her eggs were fine.

He wanted to show his support for Harry too, but he kept himself still when Harry walked back into the enclosure. The Slytherins were still the loudest, waving banners, throwing gobstones into the air, shouting Harry’s name. Harry didn’t notice at all, he was far too composed for that. He stopped in front of the judges, waiting for his scores.

“He should have got all tens,” Monty said, upset on Harry’s behalf, even if he was in first place.

“They might have taken points off for making a show of it,” Sirius explained. “He could have got that egg faster than you, kid.”

“Yeah,” Monty said. “But then people would still think he tricked his way in.”

“What do you mean?” Remus asked, just as Astrid Urquhart swandived out of the stands.

Harry was the first to react, dropping his egg and holding out his hands, shouting something that made her slow down.

“Birds of a feather,” Sirius said, relaxing as Harry caught his friend.

“She’s the captain of the Slytherin quidditch team,” Monty explained. “You should see them practice. They act like they’re going to war.”

Remus gave a strained chuckle. “I’ll have to watch sometime.”

Bagman made his voice loud again, requesting all the champions to gather in the tent. Monty hugged Sirius goodbye and hurried out of the stands. He was happy to hear people talking about Harry and not grumbling about Monty’s own performance. Kreacher’s performance, really. He’d made the First Task look like a complete joke.

Harry silently thanked Viktor, Fleur, and Bagman for being three self-absorbed people. Harry was free to ogle Percy unobserved, watching as Percy turned more and more red. He was pretending to be busy with his clipboard. Harry had no idea where Percy had even got one. Maybe when he was out shopping in the muggle world.

He finally gave Percy a break when the tent flap opened, revealing his little brother. Monty looked elated to see him, fighting to keep down a smile. Harry could admit he had also wanted to impress his brother, and was feeling more than a little proud of having done so.

“Wicked,” Monty said. It was the highest possible praise.

“House-elf rights,” Harry said, drawing a look from Percy. He winked at him, and Percy’s entire face burned red. Harry was counting the days until he was out of Hogwarts.

Bagman started talking, which was annoying but Harry put up with it. The man dressed like a bumblebee congratulated them all on a job well done, told them house-elves were no longer permitted in the tournament, said the next task was in February, and pointed out the hinges on their eggs.

Harry opened his golden egg right then and there.

The egg was empty, but it emitted a grating, high-pitched wail that made everyone in the tent cringe and cover their ears. Bagman shouted for him to close it, but Harry ignored him,

listening intently.

*Come seek us where our voices sound
We cannot sing above the ground
And while you're searching, ponder this
We've taken what you'll sorely miss
An hour long you'll have to look
And to recover what we took
But past an hour—the prospect's black
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back*

Satisfied, Harry closed his egg.

“What was that for?” Monty demanded.

“Evans, I believe Mr. Bagman specifically asked you *not* to open the egg,” Percy said, checking to see if his glasses were cracked.

“Really?” Harry said, tucking his egg under his arm. “I couldn’t hear him.”

Fleur shot him a dirty look and marched out of the tent, her silver hair swinging like the tail of an angry cat. Bagman, grimacing and dripping sweat, hurried after her. Viktor left too, slumping away in a black mood.

“Get out, Potter,” Harry said. “I’ve got to ask Weasley something tournament-related.”

Monty’s eyes darted between him and Percy, an impish smile growing, but he left without a word.

It was just Harry and Percy in the tent.

Harry took out his wand and sealed the tent flap shut.

Percy swallowed nervously. “Mr. Crouch is waiting for me.”

Harry let his egg fall to the ground, backing Percy into a corner. He gently took Percy’s clipboard from his shaking hands and set it down on a stool. Harry reached up, wrapping fingers lightly around the back of Percy’s neck, pulling him closer.

“Percy,” he breathed into his cute, pink ear, making the older boy shudder. He pressed his thumb lightly against Percy’s throat, enjoying how it felt when he swallowed. “How are you meant to see me *exercise my talents* when I’m in the middle of a lake?”

Monty had not completely come around to someone like Harry fancying someone like Percy. What did they talk about? Percy, in his experience, was a prat, while Harry was amazing. Did Percy even deserve Harry?

There was no accounting for taste.

Shaking his head, Monty walked around the cluster of trees and encountered a group of people. He wasn’t surprised to see Luna and Neville, the latter of whom looked extremely nervous. Monty was, however, surprised to see both Hermione and Ron.

Hermione was spitting mad.

“How could you?” she demanded, marching towards him. She looked ready to slap him. “How could you make that poor house-elf face a dragon!”

Ron said nothing, but he looked upset too. Monty had no idea what about.

“He’s not a *poor house-elf*,” Monty said irritably. “Kreacher’s over six hundred years old, and —”

“Kreacher!” Hermione shrieked. “He’s named *Kreacher*?”

“I didn’t name him,” Monty said. “That’s just his name. Maybe his mum named him, I don’t know. I haven’t asked.”

“And you had the *nerve*,” Hermione continued, brandishing her S.P.E.W. badge, “to claim it was for house-elf rights!”

“It was!” Monty exclaimed. “Neither of us are house-elves! How are we supposed to support their welfare when you haven’t asked them what they want?”

“Did you ask *Kreacher*?” Hermione asked acerbically. “Or did you just order your slave around?”

Monty glared at her. “I *asked* him, Hermione! He isn’t my house-elf, he’s a friend! He’s not bound to listen to me! Watch. Kreacher?”

Hermione hesitated, looking around to see if Kreacher appeared.

“See?” Monty said heatedly. “He doesn’t have to obey me, and he isn’t my slave! Which, by the way, is a real shit thing to accuse me of!”

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Ron said, his face bright red with anger.

Monty scoffed. “So it’s alright for her to have a go at me? I didn’t put my name in that Goblet, I don’t want to be in this tournament, and I did what I had to do, with the help of a *friend*, to get through it!”

“Not like it was a big deal,” Ron said mulishly. “You didn’t even have to fight. The house-elf did all the work for you.”

“That was the *point*, you twat!” Monty shouted. “That’s the bloody point I was trying to make!”

As Monty knew, things could always be worse. Things obligingly became significantly worse when Rita Skeeter popped out from behind a tree.

“Would you care to elaborate on that, Monty?” she asked, her acid green robes matching her Quick-Quotes Quill. Her bedazzled glasses highlighted the calculating look in her eyes. Monty had no idea how she got interviews with anyone, looking like a praying mantis on the verge of consuming her latest victim.

He wanted to tell her to fuck off and mind her own business, but was struck with a brilliant idea.

“As a matter of fact,” Monty said, reigning in his anger. “I would. I’m the secretary for the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare.” He dragged Hermione forward, who had grown ashen while he and Ron argued. “This is Hermione Granger, our president. We seek comprehensive changes in the legal status of house-elves, and demand the Ministry take action to protect house-elves forced to live in abusive homes. Isn’t that right, Hermione?”

He gently shook Hermione to get her talking. Neville was hovering around, unsure of what to do. Luna was crouched, looking through the grass. For four-leaf clovers, Monty imagined. As for Ron, he could suck an egg. Monty had a nice fat golden one he could cram into his stupid mouth.

Canary

Chapter Summary

November 1994

Percy pulled at a ginger coil of hair. It was getting long. Unprofessionally long. He would have to cut it. He was loath to ask his mother to do so, as she would style it however she saw fit. He didn't want it too short.

He braced his hands on the sink, looking down so he would not have to see himself blush. Harry liked his hair. Percy had never thought of it as anything special; one couldn't throw a brick without hitting a redhead in the Weasley and Prewett families.

Harry made him feel special.

He gripped the porcelain, trying to suppress the memory of Harry kissing his neck, whispering an offer to help find a way to show the Second Task, *sniffing* him. It was quite embarrassing, and Percy always worried someone would look at him and know right away what he had been up to. The things he had let another boy do to him. What he *wanted* Harry to do to him.

He took a shuddering breath, then turned on the tap. It was another thing no one ever thought about, the water that ran through their pipes. Charmed pipes, conjured water. Bathing, washing dishes, washing his clothes. When he was very young, young enough to still take baths regularly, he had been terrified the water would get inside him somehow and make him sick. It had grown into something of a phobia, though he did his best to hide his fear. What child was afraid of a bath? What adult was?

Percy splashed his face with cold water, his eyes and mouth firmly shut against any intrusion. He needed a haircut. Either he would do it himself and risk a bad job, or subject himself to his mother's crinal machinations. There were likely other options, but Percy was too off balance to think of them.

Doing nothing. That was another one. He would defer the decision to a later point in time.

Finishing his ablutions, Percy quickly went to his room to get dressed for work. It was a relief to not have any siblings around to bang down the bathroom door, or to get in his way when he was only partially dressed, to not have to take his clothes with him to the bathroom, to have some modicum of privacy.

Once in his room, he firmly shut his door, then sat on his bed. Trying to not think of Harry was an exercise in futility. He had seen him the day before, so the memories were strong. The

image of Harry, standing defiantly against a dragon ten times his size. A student doing what it took a team of dragon-keepers to pull off. He had known for years that Harry was something...more. More focused, more dedicated, more determined. He took his education, he took *magic*, more seriously than anyone Percy had ever met.

Percy knew, from his own experience, that any supposed natural gifts only took one so far. Ron, who was an excellent chess player, still had played hundreds of games. Hermione, who was remarkably bright, still studied nonstop. Monty, who could fly as soon as he touched a broom, routinely drilled.

Someone like Harry could have put in almost no effort and still done well at Hogwarts. Rather than putting in that token effort, Harry had pushed himself relentlessly. Percy had no idea what drove Harry, but he stood in admiration of it nevertheless. He dreamed of the duel they had, regretting he had only that one opportunity to witness firsthand what Harry was capable of, what he was holding back, the secrets that dwelt behind those enchanting, tenebrous eyes.

Percy gripped his worn duvet, frustrated with himself. He could not spend all of his time daydreaming about Harry, however preferable that was. He had to get dressed, go downstairs, have breakfast, and go to work.

Occlumency. Clearing his thoughts, his overcrowded mind. Breathing out, letting go.

Percy stood, selecting black, austere robes. The Second Task was not for three months. He would see Harry in three months. Percy pulled on his robes, smoothing the fabric down, put his glasses on, socks, shoes, wand, pocket watch, the pen Harry had given him, briefcase. All the essentials.

Had anyone taken photographs of Harry?

Shaking his disobedient head, Percy exited his room and walked downstairs. His mother, as always, was in the kitchen.

"Percy, there you are!" she said, turning to smile warmly at him. Percy did not smile back. He could not recall the last time he had smiled at his parents. "You got in late last night. Charlie sent an owl, but I would love to hear about the First Task!"

"Of course," Percy said, glancing at the clock and wishing it told the specific time, rather than when it was time to feed the chickens. He could do the conversion, but it was tedious. It was attuned to his mother's routine, and no one else's.

"How was Monty?" she asked, sitting down across from him, her pleasant face marred by worry. "Was he alright?"

"Yes," Percy said. "He called a house-elf, who retrieved the objective on his behalf. He was, at no point, in any danger."

"A house-elf," his mother repeated. "Charlie said the same, though I can't imagine where Monty would have met one."

“Hogwarts,” Percy said, knowing it had not been a Hogwarts elf. The crest he had worn was different, and based on Sirius Black’s reaction, Percy concluded the house-elf was connected to the Black family.

His mother frowned. “Well, I’m glad he’s alright, though Charlie says he didn’t score well.”

“No,” Percy said. “While within the rules, using the services of a house-elf defeats the spirit of the tournament. I believe that, as an unwilling participant, that was the point Monty was attempting to make. The only spell he cast was to advocate for house-elf rights.”

His mother looked surprised. “I had no idea he was interested in that!”

Percy had, only through Harry’s letters which had contained references to the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare. An unfortunate name, and one that did not endear others to the cause. The acronym should not have mattered, given the weight of the issues Hermione was concerned with, but children and teenagers readily viewed it as a joke.

“How about the champions from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons?” his mother asked.

Percy told her about Delacour’s lackluster performance, putting her dragon in a partial slumber, and Krum cruelly attacking his dragon’s eyes. Neither had been inspiring, nor very entertaining, barring when Delacour’s robes caught on fire. And the tragedy of a mother dragon crushing her own eggs.

He did object to Monty being considered a *champion*. He had not put his name in the Goblet of Fire. The prevailing theory was someone had hoodwinked the Goblet into accepting a fourth school, and a fourth champion. As to who had done it, they were no closer to unveiling that plot. The slip of parchment that had been ejected from the Goblet had Monty’s name on it, disturbingly in his own handwriting. Someone had got close to him in order to obtain a sample. Where, how, and when were unknown. That a mysterious person with a hidden agenda had been in close proximity to Monty Potter, the Boy Who Lived, was deeply unsettling.

Percy also had reservations about the Goblet of Fire itself, as a tool of contract. Any other contract someone had been entered into against their will would not be valid, and yet the Goblet had bound Monty despite the duplicity. It was a flawed artifact. Percy did not know how many others had been entered into the Triwizard Tournament without their knowledge. That there had been two in this tournament alone made Percy suspect it had long been an accepted part of the proceedings. True, Harry had not admitted to it, but his evasions made Percy think that perhaps Harry’s friends had put his name in. However marvelous his battle against the Hungarian Horntail had been, Harry had performed under duress.

As his thoughts inevitably drifted to Harry, Percy noted his mother’s line of questioning had conspicuously avoided a certain champion.

Harry had already worked out the Second Task. Percy knew he would. Harry was a spellcrafter, he routinely studied a wide variety of languages. Unraveling incantations, creating his own. It was only a matter of time until he ventured into the unknown territory of creating spells in Troll, or Mermish, or the roar of a dragon. Languages which, by their very

nature, were magic. He might even explore parseltongue, something so maligned it was never spoken of. There was no limit to what Harry could achieve.

Percy sat up. Harry must have heard the basilisk in the walls. What if he hadn't? Would Ginny still be alive? How could his mother possibly forget that?

Harry had a babelfish. It had translated the Mermish riddle, though the true barrier was recognizing the sound as Mermish at all. The merfolk almost never surfaced, and few had heard their voices out of water.

What would his mother say about the babelfish? That a creature so rare its existence was practically a myth had chosen Harry? That Ginny was still with them because of that?

"Mother," Percy said, his heart in his throat. "You haven't asked about Evans."

"Oh, Charlie told me all about that," she said, standing up and walking back to the stove.

Percy closed his eyes, holding back everything he wanted to say to her. Addressing the dragon in the room while he still lived under her roof would not end well. He doubted his mother would evict him, but it would make his life more uncomfortable. Harry had done so much for their family, so much for Percy, that to disregard him simply for a preference of his...

"I was informed," Percy said evenly, "that during the dragon selection, Evans purposefully gave Monty the smallest and least aggressive dragon. He took the Hungarian Horntail for himself."

His mother began cracking eggs. Rather, the eggs began cracking themselves. She charmed them to do it.

"Is that so?" she said without looking at him.

"Yes," Percy said. "And, despite encumbering himself so, Evans received the most points."

"I know, dear," she replied, still not looking at him. "Charlie told me. There's no need to rehash it all, you have work soon."

Errol arrived with the morning post, and that was the end of their conversation.

Monty rubbed his eyes, tired from how long he had been kept up after the First Task. His fellow Gryffindors had taken the perspective that using a house-elf—asking one for help—had been clever. Hermione was still wrapping her head around Kreacher *not* being a forced participant, unlike Monty's present situation, and that he had answered Monty's call of his own volition. He had not talked about who Kreacher was actually enslaved to, Kreacher's

resentment of his bond to Sirius, nor how much Sirius loathed Kreacher's continued devotion to his mother despite how she had treated Sirius.

Neither of them had a choice. Sirius would have freed Kreacher to find another home, but Kreacher had lived with and for the Black family for centuries. He was part of the Black family, full stop, and the only others he would willingly serve had in turn served, or sympathized, with Voldemort. Sirius would not have cared, had he not had Monty to consider. In a sense, it was Monty's fault Kreacher was still bound to Sirius.

Monty sighed, dipping his spoon into a bowl of cornflakes. He didn't even like cornflakes that much, but it was something the Dursleys had rarely allowed him to have, and on those occasions the milk had been watered down.

The food tasted better at Hogwarts. It was the magic, Monty knew. In the grass the cows ate, in the air they breathed. He imagined the cornflakes were handmade as well, not something bought in bulk from a supermarket. They were never stale, never grew soggy no matter how long he left them in the milk. The milk never got warm, but was always pleasantly cold, rich, and sweet. Something so simple as a bowl of cornflakes had been elevated. Monty had never seen the other students appreciating this, other than Harry. Ron's family was poor, but he had never been deprived like Monty and Harry had been. Ron's only appreciation of cornflakes was in the quantity he could consume.

He looked up at Ron, who was sitting across from him. So was Hermione. Monty had no idea what to think about that. He was further perplexed when Ron abruptly turned into a canary.

"I like this Ronald better," Luna said from Monty's side, drawing a look of reproof from Hermione.

Luna, Monty had noticed, no longer sat at the Slytherin table. She was a link between him and Harry, drifting back and forth. Now that they were both receiving more attention, Harry in particular, she had intuited that Harry wanted at least the appearance of severing that connection. Luna had chosen Monty, which he was both grateful and sad for. Sad, because he knew how she looked up to Harry, and grateful because she had been there when Monty needed his friends the most. She believed in him.

Ron chirped indignantly. He was now a Ron-sized fluffy yellow canary. A vast improvement.

"You should try flying," Monty suggested. Ron the canary tilted his head angrily, loudly whistling and tittering like a siren over the laughter now filling the Great Hall.

Sadly, after a minute Ron molted, once again resuming his guise as a moody, gangly teenager, picking oversized feathers out of his eggs.

"I'm really looking forward to Herbology," Neville said excitedly as Ron got into an argument with his brothers over Canary Creams. "I can't wait to show Professor Sprout the fewmets I collected."

"Fewmets?" Hermione asked, pulling feathers out of her hair.

“Usually the dragon dung we have is a composite,” Neville explained. “They shovel it all together.”

Hermione made a face at *dung*. “That sounds...fascinating.”

“What’s *really* fascinating is seeing how the dragon breed affects the qualities of the fertilizer,” Neville said. “Does dung from a Common Welsh Green work better on plants from Wales?”

Hermione tried to smile, then tried to go back to breakfast, then gave up on both. Monty had no idea what she and Ron were up to, but they seemed to be putting more effort into getting along with Monty and his other friends. Maybe seeing the dragon had put things in perspective, for both of them. Monty almost wished he had fought the Swedish Short-Snout. If he had been injured, the guilt would have eaten Ron alive.

It was an unkind thought, but Monty still hadn’t forgiven Ron, nor had Ron apologized.

Luna reached for his wrist, brushing the bracelet Monty had vowed to never take off. It was girly, but it was also made out of precious unicorn hair. More importantly, Luna had given it to him. And he liked it.

“Have you opened your egg yet?” Hermione asked, in a bald attempt to shift the conversation away from dung. Frankly, Monty was more interested in the dung.

“No,” Monty said, picking up his spoon again. The milk was still cold, the cornflakes still perfectly golden and crisp. Magic worked its way into every aspect of his life. Monty couldn’t believe it had taken him so long to recognize that.

“Why not?” Hermione asked, her brow furrowing in concern.

Monty shrugged, masticating his miraculous cornflakes. During the impromptu party in the common room, everyone had implored him to open the golden egg, which he refused to do. He could hardly believe most had accepted that he was playing along with the tournament rules, not asking anyone for help and working out the clue on his own. He simply didn’t want to waste time talking to people who had no idea what was going on.

Harry had already opened his egg, and forced them all to listen to that horrible wailing sound. Monty hadn’t the faintest what it meant. Though Harry had kept his face blank while listening to that awful noise, he had been *listening* to it. Monty would bet his broom that Harry had already sussed out the clue.

Monty swallowed his food. “The Second Task isn’t for three months, Hermione. There’s plenty of time.”

Hermione looked like she wanted to disagree, but she accepted his rationale. This was also a change, particularly for someone he knew was writing O.W.L. practice essays on a daily basis.

“What are you talking about?” Ron asked, rejoining them. Whatever argument he had with Fred and George had apparently gone poorly, as he was looking more cross than before.

“Dragon dung,” Luna immediately supplied.

Ron, strangely, perked up. “Did you know someone owed Percy dragon dung over summer? I think it might’ve been Fred and George.”

Monty held his tongue, glancing at the Slytherin table. Harry had always behaved a little indifferently towards the other Wealseys. Monty had seen what Fred and George looked like after a Defense lesson. Making fun of Percy seemed like a very bad idea, particularly if the boy who fancied him could single-handedly take on a dragon.

Harry was popular.

It was an unintended consequence of wanting to impress his not-yet-boyfriend, and one he had neglected to factor in. He had never envied the attention his little brother received, and in fact resented it for how uncomfortable it made Monty. Harry had, in the past, been somewhat notorious during the reign of the basilisk, and his misguided attempt at dating Cedric Diggory. He was known as a prefect, and as the gobstones captain of a rather spirited team.

None of this had people stopping him in the corridors, congratulating him, complimenting him, asking him for an autograph. Somehow Mafalda had got hold of Colin Creevey’s camera and was taking pictures left and right, cackling to herself. Not even the common room was safe. The adulation of his gobstones team had soared to unreasonable new heights.

Five minutes of it had been more than enough for Harry. He was used to spending a significant amount of time alone. From his grandmother’s death to his first time sitting at the Slytherin table, Harry could count the number of times he had spoken to another person on one hand. His friends understood that he needed, and wanted, time alone. He found himself wishing for Monty’s weird invisibility cloak, just for some peace of mind.

After one day of his meteoric rise in popularity, Harry had retreated to his dormitory. He could ignore it for the most part, act like he acted every other day of his life, remain cool and detached. He still heard people. He still saw them. It was still happening to him, no matter what his reaction was.

Cassius was already in the dormitory, finding his own sanctuary in a book about moleomancy.

“I hope you don’t use that on me,” Harry said, sitting down next to a sleeping Lady Madeleine. His friends had brought her to watch the First Task, but thankfully she wasn’t so easily impressed.

“There would be no point,” Cassius said, glancing up at him. “You don’t have any moles.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “There’s no way you could know that.”

“Do you?” Cassius asked, lowering his book.

Harry frowned in thought. “No, actually. But, again, how could you know?”

“Educated guess,” Cassius said, sitting up. “For someone so smart, you sometimes have a surprising lack of self-awareness.”

“About moles?” Harry asked, not liking the direction the conversation was going. This was validated when Cassius closed his book.

“Don’t be obtuse,” Cassius said. “I know you too well to fall for it. Almost as well as anyone could, barring Astrid. You knew about the dragons, and you told her about them. But not the rest of us.”

“It slipped out,” Harry said.

“Bullshit,” Cassius said, giving him a hard look. “You were getting back at her for putting your name in. But that doesn’t matter. The moles.”

“Yes, you did mention the lack thereof,” Harry said. Lady Madeleine had woken up, and was nosing his hand. He placed it on her back, felt the rumble of her purr.

“You’re an enigma,” Cassius stated. “No one knows anything about you, other than you’re a frightening genius, now that you’ve revealed something of your facility with magic. No one knows who your parents are, where you’re from, how you are so magically gifted, what you get up to in the Restricted Section—”

“I study,” Harry said, feeling that was at least obvious.

“But *what* are you studying, Harry?” Cassius asked. “Would you tell anyone the truth?”

“I would,” Harry said. “I’ve been studying wandlore. How is this related to my self-awareness?”

“The lack thereof,” Cassius corrected, smirking at him. “Are you honestly surprised at people taking an interest in you? You’re a puzzle they want to solve. I’d wager you’ll be hearing from Diggory soon.”

“I feel like I should spit, or throw salt over my shoulder,” Harry said, his already less-than-stellar mood sinking.

“Are these muggle rituals?” Cassius asked.

“Superstitions,” Harry said, drawing his legs up. “Things to ward off bad luck. Like spilling salt, seeing a black cat, breaking a mirror, walking under a ladder, opening an umbrella indoors, stepping on a crack—”

“I get it,” Cassius said, smiling slightly. “Muggles are strange. There’s no need to convince me of that, I knew as soon as I saw you with braces.”

Harry smiled too, then popped in his retainers and bared his teeth. “I liked it better when you all thought they were a muggle torture device.”

Cassius shrugged, picking up his book again. “Truth will out.”

Harry left Cassius to his reading, and picked up his little Hungarian Horntail model. He had not yet woken her from her magical slumber, wanting to examine her without getting bit. It kept him occupied.

Hours later, unable to sleep, Cassius’ words came back to him.

Truth will out.

What Fresh Hell

Chapter Summary

November 1994

Chapter Notes

The comments breathe life into my withered husk

I'm not speaking metaphorically. My power went out and it's hot as fuck.

Anyway, here's a [song](#) for the last chapter

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

HERO TO HOUSE-ELVES

Boy-Who-Lived Speaks Out

By RITA SKEETER

In a move no doubt calculated to amaze and dazzle those in audience, the Ministry of Magic imported four dragons for the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament. The champions were confronted with four nesting mothers: a Swedish Short-Snout, a Common Welsh Green, a Chinese Fireball, and a Hungarian Horntail. The Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau has yet to issue a statement regarding the legality of the international transport of dragon eggs. Whether the Muggle Prime Minister was informed of this operation remains unknown.

While the audience marveled at these magnificent monsters, one boy was not so impressed. Hogwarts Champion Monty Potter, better known as the Boy-Who-Lived, was the first to battle his beast. When faced with certain death, the Boy-Who-Lived did what any red-blooded wizard would do: he summoned a house-elf for assistance.

But Monty had other plans that fateful day. What first seemed a common sense solution to an uncommon situation resulted in an unanticipated upset. Monty Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, savior of the wizarding world, sacrificed his chance at victory to take a stand for house-elf rights.

What, dear readers, are house-elf rights? In this exclusive, on-the-scene interview, Monty shares his thoughts.

“Nesty!” Aunt Muriel screeched.

Percy looked up from the *Sunday Prophet* as the house-elf appeared, bowing low.

“Get my shawl,” Aunt Muriel said, scowling at the grey sky. “The weather’s turning.”

“Yes, mistress!” Nesty squeaked, vanishing only to reappear a moment later, draping a shawl over Aunt Muriel’s thin shoulders. Nesty bowed again, and was gone.

Aunt Muriel grunted, readjusting the shawl. “Is that the new Skeeter article, Percival?”

“Yes, Auntie,” Percy said, showing her the front page. It was a picture of Monty from inside the enclosure, accepting a golden egg. The house-elf had been cut out of the photograph.

Aunt Muriel narrowed her eyes. “She’s only been writing about Monty Potter lately. She’s lost her touch! I wanted to see that Slytherin boy of yours, Henry!”

“Harry,” Percy said stiffly, looking back at the article, “performed admirably.”

“Initially, our short-term aims were to secure fair wages and acceptable working conditions,” says Monty’s close friend and rumored love interest, Hermione Granger. Hermione, as dedicated readers know, is a gorgeous muggleborn girl with a heart of gold to match her brilliant mind. It was Hermione, Monty ardently insists, who spearheaded this one-of-a-kind campaign. Hermione is the acting president of S.P.E.W., the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare. Monty has taken on the humble role of secretary to support his sweetheart.

“It’s important that we think about what the house-elves want,” says Monty. Linking arms with Hermione, Monty presents a united front against what he claims is “the Ministry not enforcing their own laws.”

“If they want to get paid, they should get paid,” says Hermione, whose passion for house-elf rights, sources say, is second only to her passion for Potter.

Percy skimmed the rest of the article, dismayed that it was entirely about Monty’s ill-advised interview with Skeeter. Throwing his name behind house-elf rights was a smart move, but Skeeter always had another angle. She didn’t care a whit about house-elves.

“Mr. Crouch will be displeased,” Percy said, checking the front page again to see if anything substantial had been written about the Triwizard Tournament. There was something in the

Sports and Games section, which he turned to.

“Barty hasn’t been happy since the day he threw his son in Azkaban,” Aunt Muriel said. “A Death Eater in the family, imagine that! I never thought he would live it down. Not to mention what he did to Sirius Black. I was hoping Skeeter would reopen that scandal. That would light a fire under his arse!”

Percy’s head snapped up. “Sirius Black?”

Aunt Muriel gave him a shrewd look. “You ought to know more about the man you’re working for, Percival. Don’t hitch your wagon to that abraxan.”

“What do you mean, Auntie?” Percy asked.

“Sirius Black didn’t get a trial,” Aunt Muriel said with an eerie grin. “It was all the talk in the Wizengamot during that Pettigrew disaster. Closed chambers and all,” she said, waving a hand. “You wouldn’t have heard of it. How much did Barty pay Skeeter to keep her mouth shut?”

“Mr. Crouch wouldn’t do that,” Percy said.

Aunt Muriel cackled.

Unsettled, Percy went back to the article that actually talked about the First Task.

“More post?” Aunt Muriel said, squinting at the sky.

Percy sighed, then looked up to see a barn owl flying towards them, carrying a brown paper package. The owl landed in front of him. Percy untied the package as the owl pecked at a sausage. There wasn’t a name on it, and Percy’s heart sped up. There was only one person he knew who sent anonymous packages.

“What’s that?” Aunt Muriel asked, leaning forward.

Percy unwrapped the paper, revealing a stack of photographs. The first one was Harry, looking up at the Hungarian Horntail.

Percy’s mind went completely blank, blood rushing to his face. There was no possibility Harry had sent him photographs. He wasn’t vain, and Percy doubted he liked having pictures taken of himself. That left Percy with two culprits.

He was going to kill Fred and George.

What if he had opened the package in front of their mother? Why did they never *think*?

“Is that Henry?” Aunt Muriel asked, snatching up the top photograph. A disconcerting smile grew on her aged face. “What a handsome boy! Very distinct features, don’t you agree, Percival?”

Percy said nothing, looking at the next picture. It was one of Harry running at the dragon. Someone, it seemed, had recorded every moment of the fight.

Percy pinched the bridge of his nose. Dealing with Gryffindors as a prefect had been hard enough. Now they continued to torment him from afar, even after he had laid down his badge.

More privately, something he wasn't quite ready to acknowledge, Percy was glad Harry's genius had been captured. He had proof of it. He had a picture of Harry. Harry in motion.

Still blushing, Percy tentatively looked at the next photograph.

Aunt Muriel was cackling again. "Excellent! Now *this* is what I call journalism. Percival, come sit next to me. Nesty! Put on another pot of tea!"

As he sat next to his great-great-aunt, replaying Harry's fight one photograph after another, Percy became gripped with a fear stronger than Aunt Muriel's hold on his arm. What if Colin Creevey had followed Harry out of the enclosure? Into the tent? What if he had photographed them together?

It was pure luck that he hadn't. Suddenly, Harry not being featured in the *Daily Prophet* seemed a very good thing to Percy. They couldn't risk exposure like that. He couldn't risk his job.

They had to be more careful.

"A *competitor*?" Astrid seethed, tearing the *Sunday Prophet* in her hands. Harry was surprised she hadn't shouted, but shaving her head had seemed to mellow Astrid's mood. He could still see she was furious, but she wasn't launching herself at the Gryffindor table to scream in Monty's face.

Baby steps.

"They did say he was in first place," Cassius said, still reading his book on moleomancy. Harry suspected he was trying to find out what having no moles meant. It was like doing astrology with a starless sky. There was nothing to divine from it.

Harry had already read the blurb on the First Task. Others were expressing puzzlement over it not being featured, given the task had involved dragons. But dragons were bog-standard. Dragon eggs could apparently be bought at the Three Broomsticks. Every magical child in Britain could have their very own. Someone taking a stance supporting house-elves, however, was news. That it was the Boy-Who-Lived made it a headline.

Harry hadn't expected Monty to give an interview, and certainly not with a predatory reporter who was banned from Hogwarts. At most, he expected his brother's statement to be featured

in a more broad article covering the First Task. Rita Skeeter's exclusive had far exceeded his expectations. Everything was coming up Harry. He had silently laughed at Kreacher being intentionally cut out of the photograph of his brother receiving the golden egg. The last line of the article almost did him in.

No house-elves were given permission to comment.

"Cas is right," Adrian said, smiling broadly at Harry. "You're in first place, mate! One step closer to that thousand galleons!"

Astrid smacked him with her *Prophet*. "That was a secret, you idiot!"

Harry showed no reaction, focusing on the article. Skeeter was more interested in Monty's relationship with Hermione, repeating the scant details of Monty's past Skeeter had unearthed, and Monty's physical appearance. There were only a few direct quotes. The house-elf aspect was more of a gimmick, a vehicle for Monty and Hermione's supposed dedication to each other. The woman was writing about a fourteen and a fifteen year old, treating it like one of Gilderoy Lockhart's torrid affairs. That interest in his little brother's non-existent romantic life was selling papers was abhorrent.

There was nothing to be done about it. Monty was fair game to exploit. There were no laws to protect him, to protect his privacy. Harry had been unable to find whether such a concept even existed in the magical world. Legilimency, truth potions, memory charms; there were so many ways for a reporter to simply take what she wanted. Monty didn't have a voice in the Wizengamot. The Black family had lost their hereditary seat to a Ministry stooge.

Hopefully the article would spur Sirius Black into burning down the *Daily Prophet* offices once and for all. That, or pay Skeeter off.

However relieved Harry was that he had only been mentioned in passing, the guilt gnawed at him. He was impotent in this regard. No one cared what a muggleborn student thought, with the exception of Hermione, and only that by virtue of her association with Monty. Harry could fight a dragon for his brother, but he could not manage his public image. Not unless he dealt with the Skeeters and Creeveys of the world firsthand. The public's interest in Monty Potter would never go away.

"Are you mad again?" Astrid asked, jogging Harry from his spiraling thoughts.

"About what?" he asked, having lost track of the conversation. He looked up at his friends, who had varying expressions of guilt and chagrin. Someone had charmed a newspaper to tap Adrian's head like he was a bad dog.

"The prize money," Cassius explained, sounding slightly exasperated. "That was one of their motivations for entering you. You're poor, and a muggleborn, and we are all to some degree worried how you will manage once we're out of Hogwarts."

“Oh,” Harry said faintly. He hadn’t thought his friends would take his relative poverty into consideration. Not that he was still impoverished, his dad paid for most of his things. He hadn’t needed to pickpocket in ages.

There was a strange feeling in his chest. His friends genuinely believed the tournament was a good opportunity for him, perhaps the only opportunity he had to reach a status equivalent to their own.

“I’m not mad,” he finally said, his throat tight. He took out his wand, whispered a *muffliato*. It was his dad’s own creation, a charm more subtle than outright silencing an area. Their voices would sound like buzzing to anyone trying to listen in, like a certain camera-toting first-year. Mafalda needed to work on eliminating her *I’m up to something* face.

“It’s the kind of money that could change my life,” Harry said honestly, looking at each of his friends. Astrid’s determination, Jasmine’s trepidation, Phoebe’s anxiety, Terence’s embarrassment, Adrian’s getting smacked in the face with a newspaper, Cassius’ acceptance. “I’m going to win.”

“Do you want us to help?” Jasmine asked, leaning forward. “Don’t get me wrong, you were brilliant against that dragon, but who knows what the other tasks are.”

Harry took a breath, not looking at Cassius. He could already guess his reaction. “I do. I knew what the First Task was straight away, and I know what the Second Task is.”

“How?” Adrian asked, not bothering to defend himself against the increasingly crumpled *Sunday Prophet*.

“Deductive reasoning,” Harry said, smiling slightly. “You should’ve taken arithmancy.”

“Well?” Astrid demanded. “What is it?”

So Harry told them.

“Hey.”

Harry hesitated, then finished taking a book from the shelf. After breakfast, and telling his friends about the Second Task, for the first time in history they all went to the library together. It was incredibly suspicious, but Harry could see no way of turning down their offers of help without driving a wedge between them all. The riddle of the Second Task was a secret that cost him nothing to part with.

“Hello, Cedric,” Harry said, turning to look up at him. Harry disliked having to look up. The few additional inches his dad had managed to eke out of his body were great, but he hadn’t cleared six feet like Cedric.

Cedric smiled at him, in a way that would compel people to do what Cedric wanted. Cedric wasn't completely stupid, he had to be aware of the effect he had on most people. Handsome, charming, friendly, kind, earnest, naive, bootlicking, preserver of the status quo, cocky, pretty boy, git. Amos Diggory would have been picking his little angel out of a Horntail's teeth.

"You were brilliant against that dragon," Cedric said. Harry could hear no lie. That was the funny thing about practicing Legilimency with his dad. His ability to sense when someone was lying, the dissonance between their words and their thoughts, gradually became stronger. Sometimes Harry wished he could just take what he wanted straight from someone's mind, skip over the conversation entirely, all the fumbled words, the evasions. His dad had the patience of a saint.

"Thank you," Harry said.

"I've told them to stop," Cedric said, moving a step closer. "The rumors. You got in fair and square. I think everyone knows that now."

"That's good," Harry said evenly. He hated the way Cedric made him feel. Made him feel *less*. Cedric was a gilded portrait of masculinity, and this teenaged, store brand Adonis had called him....

"Was there something you wanted, Cedric?" Harry asked. "My friends are waiting for me."

Cedric's eyes roved over him, in a way Harry imagined Cedric might think a girl would find flattering. The word *objectified* crossed Harry's mind. Cedric had admitted to having thought Harry was a *tomboy*, like he perceived Astrid to be. Cedric liked thin, sporty girls, but not too sporty. Astrid would break his dick off if he got within grappling distance.

Harry imagined Cedric had initially been embarrassed to find out his mistake, then quickly covered by following through. Or maybe he wanted to experiment, and Harry was convenient. Harry had already wasted enough of his life trying to unpack Cedric's motives. He no longer had the desire to know what was happening in Cedric's mind.

"You know," Cedric said, still smiling in that winsome way, "I wasn't happy with the way things ended between us."

"Be that as it may," Harry said, "things nevertheless ended. Goodbye."

He turned around and went down the nearest aisle, wishing it felt less like running away.

Harry knew what Cassius had meant, the uncertainty of who would have been chosen. If Cedric's name had been in the Goblet of Fire, would he have been the champion? Of all people, why was Harry the worthiest?

"I'd wager you'll be hearing from Diggory soon."

Harry came to an abrupt stop, startling a group of girls who had been following Viktor Krum around. They took one look at him and hurried away, their quarry forgotten.

Harry didn't think Cassius was a Seer. He was, however, incredibly observant. Cassius missed almost nothing, and was always watching for signs and portents. But, to have Cedric approach him so soon after Cassius' statement was perturbing.

"Truth will out."

Something soft and purring bumped against his leg, and Harry looked down to see Lady Madeleine. She had a note in her mouth. Harry accepted it, quickly read the message, and burned the parchment on the spot. He took a book at random from the shelf and returned to his friends. They were eager to help him. He appreciated that.

Monty had wanted to talk to Harry about the Second Task and their wailing eggs right away, but it had been a strange week.

He had been getting along with Hermione better, particularly once she had let him explain his stunt with Kreacher. Monty could only follow some of Harry's line of thinking. The champions were meant to get by on their own, but house-elves were not considered magically distinct from their owners, as far as the law was concerned. Even a rogue house-elf like Dobby was ultimately the responsibility of his masters. Using a house-elf was equivalent to using a wand, though Monty hoped they didn't snap house-elves when their owners got in trouble. Not anymore. More broadly, house-elf magic was not considered something an individual house-elf was entitled to. It was in the possession and under the control of their masters.

This was only to defend his summoning of Kreacher if the judges attempted to disqualify him. Monty didn't care if he was disqualified, but it would have been an opportunity to expose the callous and ludicrous ways in which house-elves were treated.

What had infuriated Monty was how Hermione thought he was indifferent to, or worse, exploitative of house-elves. He related to house-elves more than she knew. And she didn't know, he had never told Hermione what his life was like at Privet Drive. She could sympathize with house-elves in a sanitized way, having only briefly seen one in her entire life. No one had ever swung a frying pan at her head, then worked her to the bone while she starved. Every time she called a house-elf *poor, helpless, ignorant, slave*, Monty heard *freak, worthless, cupboard, no meals*. If she thought those things about house-elves, what would she think of him?

It was all so exhausting.

Ron had gone back to his old self, for the most part. It bothered Monty, this resetting, but life without Ron's animosity was better.

Then the Rita Skeeter article had come out that morning. The Slytherins weren't happy with Harry once again being dismissed, but they were never happy so that was nothing new.

Among his friends, Monty was the only one with a *Daily Prophet* subscription. Ron wasn't interested in current events, Luna got her news from *The Quibbler* or read the *Prophet* with him, Neville was too stressed out to deal with it, and Hermione was typically reading something else. After seeing what Skeeter had written about him and Hermione, that they were more than friends, Monty had hoped to delay the news reaching them.

There was no chance of that. *HERO TO HOUSE-ELVES* had built on Skeeter's previous article about him. The insults that had gradually died away had come back with a vengeance, and Ron had been in a foul mood all day. Monty had no idea why. He had told Skeeter that Ron was the S.P.E.W. treasurer, at Hermione's prompting, but like most people Ron saw S.P.E.W. as a joke. He actively discouraged Hermione. Monty doubted Ron was mad on his behalf. Ron wasn't the laughing stock of the school. Again.

It was a bad end to the week. He wanted to talk to Harry.

Monty had waited until all of the other boys in his dormitory were asleep, then waited an hour longer just to make sure. He checked Hester's cage, put on his invisibility cloak, and snuck out of Gryffindor Tower. He had been forced to catnap Lady Madeleine to get a message to Harry, which was only possible thanks to the Marauder's Map. He looked at it now, at Harry's dot on the seventh floor, unmoving. Feeling bad for making him wait so long, Monty walked faster.

He soon found Harry sitting against a wall, reading a book.

"You're as loud as a herd of oliphants," Harry said quietly, closing his book.

Monty let out a frustrated breath. He hadn't silenced his footsteps.

Harry only smiled, pushing himself up to walk in front of the wall. On his third pass, a door appeared, and he waved Monty in.

Monty didn't recognize the room. It was on the smaller side, dim, lined with bookshelves, and smelled faintly of mint. Puzzled, he removed his cloak and joined Harry where he sat on the floor.

"What is this place?" Monty asked, looking around.

"Just a room," Harry said easily. "Don't worry about that. It's late, and we've got classes in the morning, so I'll make this quick. Do you know how to swim?"

An insistent scratching at the door of his sleeping quarters woke Severus. Grumbling, he pushed his blankets aside, lit a candle, straightened his nightshirt, and went to discover what fresh hell awaited him.

It was the cat.

Lady Madeleine trotted right into his room, and took this presumption a step further by jumping onto his bed.

“You are only meant to come here in case of an emergency,” Severus said, approaching her. He held the candle up, and saw the cat had a note in her mouth. Now apprehensive, Severus took it and unfolded the paper.

Is there any way to prove we're related?

Chapter End Notes

My power has been restored. Yay.

Prefect Mode

Chapter Summary

December 1994

Percy set down his pen and shook out his hand, watching as the ink slowly dried on the letter he was composing. Ali Bashir, who owned a considerable portion of the Moroccan flying carpet market, had finally given up on petitioning Percy's father for an abeyance of the embargo. Having no success in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, Bashir had shifted his efforts to the Department of International Magical Cooperation, specifically the International Magical Trading Standards Body. As a junior secretary of that esteemed body, the task of rejecting Bashir had fallen to Percy.

Percy did not agree with his father's embargo. And it was, ultimately, his father's decision what was added to the Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects. His first, and perhaps most egregious, error was reducing flying carpets, and other aerial textiles, to *charmable objects*. It ignored how such textiles were produced. An authentic flying carpet was not a muggle rug charmed to fly. The very threads they were woven with were made of wool from the cirrus sheep that ran wild among the clouds. Centuries of tradition went into the creation of a single rug. They were works of art. It wasn't some muggle tea pot charmed to whistle a tune. It was a rich, complex part of magical culture that stretched back through history.

There was more to the embargo than that, and as Percy resigned himself to writing a letter to dismiss Bashir's legitimate concerns, he wished more than ever he had someone he could talk to. Someone he could trust. Someone who could appreciate the nuance and delicacy the situation ought to have been treated with. Someone who was currently sitting in his Arithmancy class at Hogwarts.

Percy sighed and continued writing. His job was to uphold the law, not subvert it. Picking and choosing who the laws applied to and when was part of why the Ministry was such a mess, why Mr. Crouch had been working diligently for years to restore their image on the international stage.

The flying carpet embargo ran counter to that end. If Percy thought less of his father, he would even say it was xenophobic. That was certainly the sentiment in the broom-friendly Wizengamot. He had heard Harry discussing with his friend Alderton a still in-development broom from Nimbus that would seat a family of six. If there was any sort of market for flying carpets in Britain, the Fambus would never get off the ground.

"Weasley, my office!"

“Coming, sir,” Percy said, grateful for a valid reason to step away from the letter to Bashir. He tucked his pen in a pocket, not willing to leave it unattended in the open, then made his way to Mr. Crouch’s office. Enforcing laws he disagreed with was something he had thought he was prepared for. Doing so had been far less consequential at Hogwarts.

Percy passed Miss Jorkin’s empty desk, then peered into Mr. Crouch’s office.

“Inside, Weasley, and shut the door behind you.”

“Of course, Mr. Crouch,” Percy said, stepping inside and pulling the door closed. Mr. Crouch was seated behind his desk, his typically impassive demeanor absent. Instead, he looked vexed.

Whatever reservations he had about Mr. Crouch’s prior decisions, Mr. Crouch had been a dedicated Ministry employee for decades. He had worked through the imprisonment of his son, the death of his son, the death of his wife, and the loss of his position as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Mr. Crouch had all but been guaranteed the office of Minister for Magic. He would never get the chance again.

Mr. Crouch’s entire life had been destroyed, yet he had persevered. He had made mistakes, monumental mistakes, and had committed the rest of his life to redeeming himself through his work. Percy respected that.

“I’ve just got an owl from Bertha,” Mr. Crouch said, placing his hand on a parchment laid flat on his desk. “She has put in a leave of absence. Another ailing relative, it would seem.” Mr. Crouch’s frown deepened. “It has come to the point where she cannot be relied upon to perform the basic functions of her job.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Percy said, not wanting to openly criticize a coworker. Miss Jorkins, who had a reputation for being not very bright and a prolific gossip, had always seemed an inappropriate choice for a busy man like Mr. Crouch.

“No need for that, Weasley,” Mr. Crouch said, his face smoothing. “You’ve proven to be an adept and effective secretary. Ken has nothing but praise for you, both for your diligence and the quality of your work. I have also been impressed,” Mr. Crouch said leaning forward, “and I can assure I am not an easy man to impress. I expected much less from a young man recently graduated from Hogwarts, even with your admirable academic achievements.”

“Thank you, sir,” Percy said, feeling slightly overwhelmed. Part of it was Mr. Crouch’s office, which itself was imposing. Percy had been less intimidated in Professor Dumbledore’s office, and the headmaster held more prestigious positions.

“I am simply stating the facts, Weasley,” Mr. Crouch said, meeting Percy’s eyes. Percy had the overwhelming urge to push up his glasses. “For these reasons, I will be promoting you to my personal assistant.”

“Yes, Mr. Crouch,” Percy said automatically, not believing he had heard correctly.

Mr. Crouch's expression softened. He almost looked amused. "Do you accept, Mr. Weasley? Or do you need some time to consider? This will increase your workload, and I wouldn't want the quality of your work to suffer."

Percy gave in and pushed up his glasses. He needed to do something to get control over himself. A promotion. He was getting a promotion. "That will not be a concern, Mr. Crouch. It would be my honor to be your personal assistant."

Mr. Crouch dismissed him, with the promise of paperwork for Percy to fill out. A promotion, and a raise. He had only been working for the Ministry for five months, and he was already the assistant, the *personal* assistant, to a department head. He could scarcely believe it.

As Percy packed up his desk, preparing to make the move to the position Miss Jorkins had abdicated, Percy began composing a new letter in his mind.

In a show of friendship—nothing else could have compelled Harry to wake up well before dawn and trudge across the frigid grounds despite having a full day of classes to look forward to, a gobstones meeting, a prefects meeting, and prefects rounds—Harry was sitting in the stands of the quidditch pitch, watching the Slytherin team's predawn practice.

It was, at the very least, much more entertaining than the typical quidditch match. Astrid had built a full reserve team, so she *could* effectively scrimmage. Instead, she flew the path of annihilation.

A beater's bat emblazoned with the message *IN CASE OF EMERGENCY* rested at Harry's side. Lady Madeleine, who in her heart still believed she was a kitten, was curled up in his robes. His mother's cloak rested over his shoulders, the charms as powerful as the day she had cast them. She must have been Harry's age, a thought he tried not to dwell on. The book he held was not being read.

Getting Monty through the tournament had consumed a large portion of Harry's time. The matter of his brother's scar had been postponed. With months until the Second Task, and the upcoming winter holiday, it was the perfect time to begin the more active portion of his research.

With Lupin and Astrid having performed an Unforgivable curse in the castle, Harry was feeling more confident that he could get away with it. He had told his dad, and through him the headmaster, what he knew about Monty. The prophecy, the dream, the pain. Both were exceptional wizards, and Dumbledore had well over a century of experience. It was perhaps arrogant of Harry to think that a student such as himself was capable of discovering what afflicted his brother. At the same time, he could not stand by and let Monty suffer.

Monty had not been seen by Madam Pomfrey, nor taken to St. Mungo's, that Harry was aware of. His dad had not brought the matter up since Harry had implored him for help. This

suggested to Harry that nothing was being done. That was unacceptable.

The Killing Curse left no mark. How had Monty even got a scar?

Harry crossed his arms, watching as the first weak rays of sunlight made a rosy halo around the mountaintops. How many things would he have to kill to reproduce the result? It was, at a remove, a matter of logistics. The act of killing itself was a daily part of life. Things were constantly dying all around him. His dad was probably killing skrewts and enjoying it. He ate meat. He knew other spells that could kill. He had killed before.

The Killing Curse was different.

Plenty of spells could kill, but the Killing Curse did something more. All of the books Harry read danced around it, leaving him discomfited. Even the incantation carried a sense of wrongness.

It was the spell that had killed his mother.

A dark shape flew around a castle tower. An owl.

Harry was suddenly aware of the sounds of the ongoing quidditch practice. Astrid shouting, Adrian shouting, everyone shouting. The dull thud of bats against bludgers, the rush of a dozen brooms racing through the air, the rapid buzzing of a snitch that had strayed into the stands, hovering unobserved. The owl drew closer. Harry's breath came out in a mist. Lady Madeleine purred.

He held out his arm for Hermes, Percy's screech owl. Hermes was as proud as Percy, and next to Hedwig he was Harry's favorite owl. He trusted both owls more than he trusted most people.

"Good morning," Harry said quietly. At a touch, the string binding the scroll to Hermes' leg unraveled. Having flown all night, Hermes did not linger. He launched into the air, his wings tilting to catch a lucky updraft, soaring towards the Owlery. Harry watched Hermes' flight for a moment, then opened the scroll he had delivered.

Dear Prefect Evans,

I am writing to inform you of a change in position. I have recently been promoted to Personal Assistant to the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation.

Harry covered his face, hiding his smile.

He disliked Barty Crouch. More than that, Harry hated the man for what he had done to Sirius Black, and vicariously what he had done to Monty. There were no reparations for twelve years in Azkaban, nor twelve years with the Dursleys. Nothing could fix what Crouch had done. Sirius and Monty would be living with the consequences for their entire lives.

He could have grown up with his brother. His gran had known Sirius, had trusted him as one of her daughter's friends, as the godfather to her youngest grandson. Maybe Sirius could have done something about the cancer, or someone at St. Mungo's could have. Everything would have been different. Everything would have been better.

Harry closed his eyes. The promotion. This wasn't about him, it was about Percy. From junior secretary to personal assistant to a department head was an incredible achievement. Harry doubted anyone else had risen so quickly through the Ministry ranks. He knew Percy was more than capable of handling such a lofty position.

Once again smiling to himself, Harry continued reading Percy's letter. He could hear Percy's voice so clearly: the barely concealed pride, his annoyance at flying carpet embargos, the gratification of having a larger desk, and consequently more room to work. His increased salary, which Percy was too polite to mention, but which Harry knew must have been a relief to him. Percy spoke so little of his health, of what it was like living at the Burrow, that Harry had to fill in the blanks. Harry didn't resent these omissions; he had his own private affairs.

By the time the sun had fully risen, and Astrid was ordering her players to the changing rooms, Harry had committed the letter to memory. He stood, readjusted Lady Madeleine in his robes, picked up the unused beater's bat, and went to join his friends.

"Say *ah*," Harry said to the venomous tentacula. He ignored the vine wrapping around his waist, knowing that the plant was searching for any chizpurples he might have on him. Harry, sadly, did not have any chizpurples. They were crustaceans, and Professor Sprout made sure none were around when he was working in the greenhouse. It added more excitement to their classes, as they had nothing with which to bribe the plants.

As sixth-years, they were now studying the mature venomous tentaculas. They were less feisty than their teething counterparts, and accustomed to students. More importantly, they were wary of Professor Sprout, and wouldn't try to eat anyone with her on the prowl. This learned behavior did little to make the venomous tentaculas any less deadly. They had fully developed fangs, and their fleshy red blossoms concealed venom sacs. Each fang could deliver enough venom to kill someone in minutes. Fangs ringed the inside of each blossom, which made milking the venom—the task which Harry was very carefully doing—a bit of a risk. He was also checking the fangs for damage and decay. Sometimes a venomous tentacula would launch itself at the glass walls of the greenhouse. When one saw a bird, for example.

The vine around his waist retreated, and the venomous tentacula rattled menacingly at him.

“You ate last week,” Harry said, fitting a vial carefully around a curved fang. “You haven't finished digesting.”

Harry gently massaged the blossom, and thick yellow venom began filling the vial.

The venomous tentacula laid a heavy, thorny vine over Harry's shoulder. Harry gave it a friendly pat. If he hadn't taken N.E.W.T. Herbology, the venomous tentacula could have had a snack. He was glad they weren't intelligent enough to associate the absence of small magical crabs with him.

After Harry finished milking the venomous tentacula, he cleaned its teeth, a process the plant enjoyed based on the racket it made. The vials of venom were given to Professor Sprout, either destined for the potions lab or the market. The latter was an assumption; the greenhouses contained a multitude of valuable specimens. Hogwarts had to get money from somewhere. It would also explain why so many people had got into N.E.W.T. Herbology, to sustain the student labor force. Other than Defense, it was the only class all of Harry's friends were still taking.

Once class was dismissed, Harry walked with them back to the castle. While crossing the grounds, Harry saw a commotion at Hagrid's hut.

“What the fuck is *she* doing here?” Astrid growled.

It was Rita Skeeter, a blight on the landscape in a magenta cloak with a collar of vivid purple fur. In a horrible coincidence, Monty's Care of Magical Creature class had also just ended. Harry could see his brother walking up from the lake with his friends. They were on a collision course with Rita Skeeter.

“God damnit,” Harry muttered. “Jasmine, can you get Professor Sprout? I'll go talk to Skeeter.”

Jasmine gave him a worried look, but she hurried back to the greenhouses.

“Going to give her a piece of your mind?” Astrid asked.

“No,” Harry said, readjusting his bag. “I'm going to inform her she is banned from the grounds. You lot go on. If you see a professor, send them out.”

“He's in prefect mode,” Phoebe whispered.

“Let's just go,” Terence said. “He can handle it, Astrid.”

Cassius had already started walking to the castle.

Sighing, Harry quickly made his way to Hagrid's hut. How did Rita Skeeter keep getting onto the grounds? The gates wouldn't have let her in. Apparition and portkeys were out of the question. She wasn't carrying a broom, but Harry wouldn't rule it out. She didn't look like she had been on a ramble through the Forbidden Forest, and the centaurs would have alerted

the headmaster. Floo access was limited to staff. Harry was uncertain whether a house-elf could apparate someone in, but the Hogwarts house-elves would have noticed that. The Knight Bus was too conspicuous, and could not get on the grounds. The Giant Squid would have capsized any boat she took.

As he approached Skeeter, Harry steadily eliminated all the means of magical transportation he was aware of. Having worked in the relevant Ministry department, he was fairly certain he had run through them all. There was, however, one instance he knew of where someone had got on the grounds by unknown means. Someone who had even got past a picket of one hundred dementors.

Sirius Black, an animagus.

It was a lapse in security Harry personally knew Hogwarts had not addressed. It explained quite a lot about how Rita Skeeter got her information.

“Excuse me, Miss Skeeter,” Harry said, drawing the woman’s attention. She stopped banging on Hagrid’s door, then turned to look at him. Skeeter’s eyes narrowed behind her bejeweled spectacles, her bright red lips quirking in a smile.

“The other champion,” she said. “Do you happen to know where Hagrid is?”

“Somewhere on the grounds, I imagine, given he’s the groundskeeper,” Harry said. “Speaking of *grounds*, Professor Dumbledore made it clear that you are not to enter them. I would be happy to escort you to the gates.”

“Would you?” she said, pulling her crocodile skin bag up to her shoulder. “How very kind of you, mister..?”

Harry didn’t finish her sentence. “I’ve already summoned a professor, Miss Skeeter.”

Skeeter glanced at his chest, where his prefect and gobstones badges were. “That’s right, you’re a prefect.”

“This way, Miss Skeeter,” Harry said.

Harry began walking towards the school gates, away from the castle, and away from the lake. He stopped and looked over his shoulder, pleased to find Skeeter’s attention on him though she had not followed. He didn’t want her running into Monty. He spotted Jasmine hurrying back, Professor Sprout puffing after her.

Skeeter heard them too, and Harry watched in fascination as the woman strategized. She was so open with her emotions, he could not comprehend why anyone would willingly speak with her. Perhaps that was why she was targeting the most vulnerable person on the payroll.

“Would you care to answer a few questions?” Skeeter asked, still not remembering his name.

“I’m afraid I don’t have time at the moment,” Harry said, just as Jasmine and Professor Sprout reached them. Jasmine gave him a concerned look.

“Thank you, Evans,” Professor Sprout said, glaring at Skeeter. “I don’t know how many times Dumbledore has warned you, young lady!”

“Let’s go,” Harry whispered to Jasmine, who had made a choked noise at *young lady*.

“You are *not* to be on the grounds! Now, come along, no dallying! I haven’t got time to be running after you all day. Don’t think I’ve forgotten what you were like as a student, Miss Skeeter!”

Harry didn’t look back as Professor Sprout herded Skeeter to the gates. He didn’t want to be an object of interest to her. But, if he was right, if Skeeter *was* an animagus, he already had something over her. If he hadn’t gone through the tedious and finicky process himself, Harry might have started seeing animagi everywhere.

“Why did she want to talk to Hagrid?” Jasmine asked as they walked up the steps and towards the noisy Great Hall. Lunch had already started.

“Because he’s the only person stupid enough to talk to her,” Harry said. “I just hope she hasn’t found out about the skrewts.”

Blood in the Water

Chapter Summary

December 1994

Monty crept down the fifth floor corridor, this time having made sure his footsteps were silent. Shrouded by his invisibility cloak, Monty ducked under snoozing portraits, skirted around an impromptu duel between two suits of armor, pressed himself against the wall as Peeves, then Mrs. Norris and Filch, ran past to see what all the ruckus was about. Monty checked the Marauder's Map, waiting until all three were out of his line of sight. After a moment, he continued his journey to the prefects' bathroom.

Professor Trelawney had stuck to horoscopy, which was frustrating as Monty really wanted to move on to lunamancy. It was properly called selenomancy, but he preferred the older name. Ron had started sitting with him during Divination again, not acknowledging the addition of Neville at their table. Monty could tell Ron was bored in class, and would have preferred to be making jokes both about the subject and Professor Trelawney. Monty couldn't afford to act like that, not if he wanted to be a prefect. He had plans. Ron didn't seem to think further ahead than his next meal.

Their discussion of Pluto during class had left Monty pensive. Pluto, in its most basic meaning, represented death. But death did not always mean a literal death in divination. In fact, it rarely did. More often it represented a change, a transformation, a rebirth. Death begat life, life begat death, an immutable circle. It could have been the shift in seasons, from autumn to winter. It could symbolize the change in Ron's behavior. Something about Monty could have changed. Or perhaps it was a larger change, a transformation so vast it was impossible to perceive it all. Nothing ever stayed the same.

Whatever it was, Monty had to be prepared to accept it.

He reached the door Harry had described. Looking at the Map one last time, Monty whispered, "*Wintergreen*."

Without a sound, the door opened for him. Monty stepped inside of a luxurious bathroom.

"Glad you made it," Harry said from where he knelt by the largest bathtub Monty had ever seen. It was massive, the size of a small pool. "Lock the door, would you?"

Monty mutely pulled the door shut, still marveling at the bathroom. Everything was in white marble and gold. A large, golden chandelier hung from the ceiling. He could see Harry's discarded clothes neatly folded next to a towering stacks of fluffy white towels. The bath itself was lined with dozens of golden taps, though Harry had only turned on a few. The

windows were open, letting in a refreshing breeze at odds with the frosty weather outside. Delicate white curtains fluttered open to reveal the waxing moon rising over the grounds. There was a single portrait on the wall, a beautiful mermaid sleeping on a rock, faintly snoring.

“Can she see us?” Monty asked nervously, removing his invisibility cloak.

“I’ve dealt with it,” Harry said, sitting back on his heels. “She won’t be waking up. The castle portraits are all gossips, you know, and they report to the headmaster.”

Monty nodded, then noticed Harry was wearing a pair of black swim trunks. He also had a shimmering white bandage wrapped around his chest. Monty had nothing to swim in, other than his undergarments, and he didn’t fancy parading in front of the whole school in those.

“Did you get hurt?” Monty asked. He turned around to take off his robes, dropping them on top of his invisibility cloak.

“You mean the bandage?” Harry asked. “No, I’m fine. It’s just something I wear to make my chest flatter.”

“Why?” Monty asked, turning back around. To his surprise, Harry was blushing slightly.

Harry sighed, then swung his legs over the edge of the pool. It had filled without Monty noticing, with crystal clear water. Harry patted a spot next to himself, and Monty walked over to join him.

“It’s a long story,” Harry said, looking over the water. Monty put his legs in too, and discovered it was slightly under room temperature. “And not one I tell people.”

“You don’t have to talk about it,” Monty said quickly.

“No, I’m going to,” Harry said, glancing at him. “I just want you to understand how personal it is, and how much I’m trusting you with.”

Monty nodded. He was starting to feel anxious. “I won’t tell anyone. I promise.”

Harry smiled faintly, then began his story.

Monty listened raptly, fighting through his embarrassment. Hogwarts didn’t have any health classes, the Dursleys would never talk about it, and he was ruining the day Sirius or Remus would give him the talk. He’d heard enough banter among the boys, and sometimes the girls, in Gryffindor to have a general idea of how it all worked. However, Harry was laying it all out very bluntly for Monty. It was mortifying, but it had to do with Harry’s health, with a medical condition he had that required a special potion for every month and painful operations.

Harry explained how he had developed differently from other boys, how he had to carry Calming Draughts with him all the time, why he felt more comfortable wearing a bandage around his chest. Monty would have never guessed Harry was going through all of that, all while hiding it from everyone.

When he was finished, Harry looked back at the water, looking almost as anxious as Monty had initially felt. Now, he felt honored Harry trusted him with something so private. He had no idea why Harry had, but it made him feel closer to Harry.

“You can ask me questions,” Harry said, his voice curiously flat. “I know I’m, well, different.”

“You’re still you,” Monty said, puzzled. “I mean, it sounds like you’ve got a lot going on, but I don’t see what difference it makes.”

Harry snorted. “You’d be surprised. It’s one of the reasons I broke up with Cedric. I told him, and it changed his opinion of me.”

Monty felt abruptly angry. He didn’t know what sort of opinion had changed, but he could guess. Everyone thought Diggory was so great, but Monty always knew he had done something to make Harry dislike him.

“He’s...” Monty struggled to find a word harsh enough to describe Diggory. “Fuck him.”

Harry laughed quietly, then smiled. “Yeah, I’m not a fan. Alright, that’s enough of the heavy. Time to learn how to swim.”

“Right,” Monty said, having forgotten the purpose of their meeting. He was still reeling from all Harry had told him, had trusted him with. The tournament was dangerous for Harry’s health. The bloody skrewts were dangerous.

“You’ve never been swimming before, yeah?”

“A few times,” Monty said. “Dudley got lessons, but I didn’t. They were probably hoping I’d drown.”

“That’s alright,” Harry said. “I didn’t learn how to swim until a few years ago. Astrid taught me. In the North Sea.”

“What?”

“The first step,” Harry said, ignoring him, “is learning how to float. Second step is don’t drown.”

“Wha—”

Harry placed a hand on Monty’s back and shoved him into the water.

It didn’t take Monty long to get the hang of swimming. Harry hadn’t suspected it would, his brother was very coordinated, and an athlete. It was disappointing he’d only flailed and

spluttered for a few minutes, before bobbing to the surface. Harry had joined him, just to help Monty get past the first hurdle of trusting the water to support him. That had been his issue, relaxing enough to not sink like a stone.

Now Monty was doing laps, arm over arm, kicking his legs in tandem. It was tiring, as Harry knew from his own recent swimming practice. He would need to lower the water temperature to match the temperature of the Black Lake, which would further increase the difficulty. The lake was half a mile wide, which anyone could see, but no one knew how deep it went. At least no one inclined to write about it in a book the Hogwarts library contained. They only had an hour to retrieve what they would sorely miss, and if the champions were expected to swim the entire way, it couldn't be more than a mile from the surface.

When Monty finished another lap, Harry gestured for him to get out of the water.

"You can come here anytime you want," Harry said as Monty shuffled over to retrieve a towel. "There are a few other things I need to talk to you about."

"Like what?" Monty said, huddling under his towel.

"I don't think it's a good idea to meet that often," Harry said, feeling a pang of guilt at the look of hurt on Monty's face. "Or send notes. Rita Skeeter's been skulking around."

"Dumbledore banned her, right?" Monty asked, shuffling back over and sitting at the edge of the pool.

"That hasn't stopped her," Harry pointed out, glancing at the open windows. "I think she might be an animagus."

"You're kidding," Monty said.

"I can't think of another way she could be getting on the grounds without anyone noticing," Harry said. "Sirius Black did, that's where I got the idea."

"But what kind of animal?" Monty asked.

"No idea, which is why we've got to be more careful," Harry said. "Who knows what she looks like, where she is, what she's seen or overheard."

Monty shivered, pulling the towel tighter around himself. "Yeah, when you put it like that..."

Harry nodded, knowing how paranoid Rita Skeeter being an animagus could make someone. What if she had been in the tent with him and Percy? He knew she had been stalking Monty instead, but it was a close call. Too close. Now Percy was Crouch's personal assistant. The stakes were higher.

"I'm going to tell the professors," Harry said. "They've probably already thought of it, but it doesn't hurt to make sure."

"Should we not talk at all anymore?" Monty asked quietly.

“That's not what I said,” Harry replied firmly. If he had to, he would cut off all contact with Monty. It would be horrible, but he would do it. “You have your cloak, you have your Map. Keep an eye on it, maybe you'll spot Skeeter. And you can use it to find me whenever you need me.” Harry hesitated, then added, “The password to the Slytherin common room is *Fulgari*.”

Monty's eyebrows shot up. “Should you be telling me that?”

“You could have found out on your own,” Harry said. “It doesn't matter.”

“That was one of the spells you used on the dragon,” Monty pointed out.

“Yeah, they changed it after the First Task,” Harry said, trying not to act too happy that his brother had remembered. “Has anyone talked to you about how your name got in?”

“No one knows,” Monty said, “according to Sirius. He thinks it's Death Eaters.”

“Possibly,” Harry said. “We don't know where Voldemort is, who his allies are, what his plan is. For all we know Skeeter's working for him.”

Monty gave him a doubtful look.

“I'm not saying she is,” Harry said, “but a lot of Death Eaters came as a surprise. Mr. Crouch's son, for example. Peter Pettigrew.”

Monty looked angry for a moment, then said, “Sirius told me to watch out for Karkaroff.”

“Yeah, Karkaroff was one,” Harry said, feeling a little angry himself. “He gave the Ministry a bunch of names, and it kept him out of Azkaban.”

“Do you think he put my name in?”

“If he did, he's a good actor,” Harry said. “I doubt it, unless he was trying to redeem himself or something. But there are better choices, I think.” Harry sighed, hoping he wasn't wrong about Karkaroff. The man was a coward. “So we don't know who, we don't know how, and we don't know why your name was put in the Goblet of Fire.”

“Don't know much, do we?” Monty muttered.

“No,” Harry said. “If someone's trying to kill you, it's a bloody convoluted way of doing it.”

Black had proven how easy it was to gain access to his brother. Harry wished he hadn't. Did Skeeter know he was an animagus? Was that where she had got the idea?

“What about practicing for the second task?” Monty asked.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “I'm working on a plan. For now, research creatures and plants in the Black Lake. You can do that on your own, and I'm sure your friends can help out. Longbottom particularly. You'd know most about the creatures, I think.”

“Should I tell them?” Monty asked. “About the task?”

“I told my mates,” Harry said. “Though it’s more like throwing them a bone. It’s not like they’ll see much when the time comes. Actually,” he said, giving Monty a thoughtful look. “I’ve been wondering, how do you get hold of Black so quickly? I thought it might be his house-elf.”

“It’s not Kreacher,” Monty said. “Sirius gave me this two-way mirror. I say his name and he shows up in it.”

“Really?” Harry said, pouting at the water. He wished he had thought of that. “That’s clever. Maybe something like that would work.” Shaking his head, Harry said, “So, look up things that live in the Black Lake. Also, learn the Bubble Head Charm. It’s what I used during that whole skrewt incident. An hour is a long time to keep it up, but you’ve got weeks to practice.”

Monty nodded, and began picking at the edge of his towel. “I’ll do that.”

Harry glanced at a window, knowing it was getting to be very late. There was something else he wanted to talk to his brother about, and he was worried about how Monty would react. He turned to look at his brother, at the scar that everyone always looked at first. Harry intentionally avoided looking at Monty’s scar, and even now he could tell Monty was becoming uncomfortable with this scrutiny.

Harry looked away from it, meeting his brother’s eyes instead. “Has your scar hurt at all lately?”

“No.”

“Do you mind if I have a look?” Harry asked.

“Might as well,” Monty said, “Everyone else has.”

Harry rolled his eyes, though he knew people’s fixation on Monty’s scar bothered his brother more than he let on.

“I’ve been researching curse scars lately,” Harry said, reaching up. Monty sighed, then pushed aside his hair. “Scars leftover from dark magic. I’ve seen lots of pictures of them. Usually the scars are rather prominent, and hard to heal.”

“Like Remus?” Monty asked, gritting his teeth as Harry traced his scar. It felt like regular skin. It was a thin, jagged scar, pale, like a bolt of lightning shot across the sky, just beginning to branch out. It was distinctive, and Harry had no idea how his brother had got it. Well, he thought knew how, but not why.

“Yeah, but most of his are self-inflicted,” Harry said, frowning in thought. It had to be related to the Killing Curse. The failed Killing Curse. One that had backfired on its caster and turned him into a wraith. Harry also had no idea what a wraith was, but he knew what remained of the Dark Lord was no regular ghost.

“I used to think it was cool,” Monty said, looking relieved when Harry pulled back. “Special, you know? Until I learned how I got it.”

“It’s both of those things,” Harry said. He had read all of Skeeter’s articles. How she called his brother’s scar ugly, said it disfigured him. It was the result of their mother’s sacrifice. Nothing like that could be ugly. “It hasn’t hurt at all?”

“No,” Monty repeated. “Just after that dream, and back in first year.”

“When Voldemort had free run of the castle,” Harry said, crossing his arms. “This is just a theory, but I reckon it’s a connection to him. And if it is, that’s another thing you’ve got to keep to yourself.”

Monty scowled. “The last thing I need is Skeeter writing about how I’m connected to Voldemort. I was worried that Ollivander would say something during the wand weighing, about our wands.”

“Whose wands?” Harry asked. “You and Voldemort?”

“Yeah,” Monty said unhappily. “He told me both our wands have feathers from the same phoenix, and that the phoenix only ever gave two.”

“Well that’s rich,” Harry said inadvertently. Why did Voldemort get to have the wand with a matching feather? “What kind of wand has he got then?”

Monty frowned in thought. “I think he said yew, but I don’t remember how long it was. Longer than mine?”

“That means he’s likely taller than you,” Harry said. “Well, not currently. And he’s arrogant. I mean, all aspects of someone’s wand can tell you a bit about their personality, about who they are or want to be.”

Harry was prepared to keep talking about wand length if he had to. His brother sharing a core with the Dark Lord was bad. Very bad. It was information that could not get out, especially not to the Dark Lord.

“Don’t tell anyone else that,” Harry said.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Monty said indignantly. “I don’t want any connection to him at all!”

“I know,” Harry said gently. “I bet Ollivander knows more than he’s letting on. Let’s hope he didn’t tell Voldemort about it when he bought his wand.”

“That’s a funny thought,” Monty said after a moment. “Voldemort going round the shops.”

“He was eleven at the time,” Harry pointed out. “Actually, that’s also a weird thought.”

Monty made a face “Did you know his name was Tom Riddle?”

There was a beat of silence as they both thought about that.

“Alright,” Harry said, standing up. “Time for bed.”

“You’re late,” Severus said as his son entered his private quarters. Harry had insisted the test be performed there. He had become increasingly paranoid since the Quidditch World Cup, and Severus did not know what to do. Was it truly paranoia if his concerns were legitimate?

“Sorry,” Harry said. He looked exhausted. It could have been the late hour, but Severus suspected it was the strain of getting two people through the Triwizard Tournament in one piece. “I told Monty about me being intersex.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Because I want to trust him,” Harry said. “He’s my brother.”

“And have you informed the Weasley?” Severus asked. Harry was entitled to tell whomever. However, his previous...dalliance...with Diggory had exposed Harry to a harsh reality. Teenagers were often careless with one another.

“We’re not even dating yet,” Harry said, his cheeks turning a splotchy pink.

Yet.

“I’m planning on it,” Harry continued, rubbing his face. “I know I ought to, particularly if—”

“You need not elaborate,” Severus said. He was not prepared to have such a discussion, and was now realizing that he should have been. Harry was sixteen. What a terrible age to be.

“I also told Monty that Skeeter might be an animagus,” Harry said, looking up at him. “She’s been showing up all over the place.”

“Yes, that is a theory which has been discussed,” Severus said. “The difficulty is catching her in the act.”

“And I’ve worked out the second task,” Harry said, walking up to the bowl that sat on Severus’ dresser.

“Will a house-elf be involved?” Severus asked.

Harry gave him an affronted look. “I’m not going to send a house-elf to the middle of the Black Lake. Is this it?”

“Obviously,” Severus said, joining his son in front of the dresser. It was a fairly simple potion, brewed with the white, spade-shaped petals of a haimangea flower. It looked like a

bowl of milk, and would change color only when they had both added their blood.

“Wouldn’t it be funny if it didn’t change?” Harry asked, picking up one of the potions knives Severus had laid out.

“No,” Severus said, using his own knife to make a thin slice in the tip of his finger. “One drop.”

“What even is a drop?” Harry asked, cutting his own finger. “I don’t think it’s very consistent.”

“As I have explained before,” Severus said as their blood splashed into the bowl, “Potions is not equivalent to muggle chemistry. It is an art.”

Harry smiled, watching as the blood spread across the surface of the milky potion, the colors shifting. They were both silent, committing the result to memory.

“The hue indicates the degree of relation,” Severus said.

“I know,” Harry said, his expression softening.

After a moment, Severus vanished the potion.

Three Card Spread

Chapter Summary

December 1994

“Open your books to page seven.”

Harry opened his dad’s old copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* to page seven. There was a picture of a cauldron containing a molten gold potion, with drops happily leaping from the surface like goldfish. His dad had helpfully annotated this with *WASTE OF TIME*.

“Felix Felicis,” his dad said, the words writing themselves in chalk on the blackboard. “Though many call this Liquid Luck. We will not be brewing this potion, and I shall not waste my time brewing it for a simple demonstration. You are being shown what this looks like so that you are capable of recognizing it, and of identifying imitations.”

Harry's dad walked among the tables, checking to see if everyone had their book open to the right page.

“Many less reputable potioners and establishments will offer what they claim is Felix Felicis, but is merely an Elixir to Induce Euphoria doctored with ground jeweled scarab. This will create a potion of a similar color, and will replicate the same feeling of giddiness, even recklessness. However,” his dad said, pointing at Jasmine’s book. She leaned back to look at him. “The surface behavior is different. What *is* that difference?”

Harry looked down at his book, scanning the list of ingredients. He had considered brewing Felix Felicis before. He was a competent brewer, if not a passionate one. His dad had complained more than once about Monty having the gall to ask him questions, but Harry suspected he was pleased one of Lily Evans' sons had inherited her talent.

Felix Felicis sounded like a good idea, if one didn’t read past the name.

“Diggory,” his dad said.

“It says here, professor, that the Euphoria Elixir produces a rainbow,” Cedric said.

“Elixir to Induce Euphoria,” his dad corrected. “This phenomenon is rather difficult to observe from within a vial. What else distinguishes these two potions?”

Harry was confident his dad could brew Felix Felicis. But, as his past self had noted, it was largely a waste of time. The ingredients themselves were an impediment, as some required an element of luck in their acquisition. Phoenix down feathers had a tendency to burn up as soon as they fell out, which did not address finding a phoenix to begin with. It felt like the inventor

had collected rare and expensive things and mixed them together hoping something would happen.

Perhaps the most onerous aspect of the potion was the brewing process. It took a full six months to brew, and it could only begin on certain days, days which were numerologically lucky to the brewer. Moreover, it was six uninterrupted months of brewing. Six months babysitting the potion. It could not be left alone.

“The consequences of failure are horrific,” his dad said blandly. “Felix Felicis does not grant the drinker luck, that is a common misconception. It is a potion that forces one to become keenly aware of their own fate.”

Harry gave him a dubious look.

“For those of you who failed to take Divination,” his dad said, “I must first congratulate you, as it is by and large a useless discipline for most students, particularly those who neglect to treat it as a serious subject.” His dad looked at Adrian, who shamelessly grinned. “It is, however, a valid one. Hogwarts would not offer an *entirely* useless class, as I frequently remind myself. Turn to page thirteen.”

As there would be no brewing that day, Harry settled in for a lecture, making some notes. His dad had learned a few more things about potions over the years, and while his insights as a sixth-year were astounding, he had still been a student. Harry spent classes making his own annotations to *Advanced Potion-Making*. Past-dad had not bought into the idea that Felix Felicis granted luck, or that luck existed at all. There was a stronger basis in the divinatory aspect, that of the infinite possibilities for the future, the potion helped its consumer choose more favorable ones.

Felix Felicis was, however, toxic in large quantities, a *large quantity* being more than a twenty-hour dose. If someone repeatedly drank it, it created a sort of resistance to the potion, and the effect was inverted. It made them unlucky. In the same way that Felix Felicis resulted in the most unlikely, yet plausible, outcomes, too much of it would result in being visited by some obscure horror. Falling down the stairs and hitting the ground in exactly the wrong way, walking down the wrong street, a rampaging skrewt in the middle of Potions class. The worst possible things would happen, and there was no escaping it.

When the bell rang, packing up went quickly. There were no ingredients to store, no cauldrons to clean, no trips to the hospital wing. Harry placed his book into his bag and stood to leave.

“There is an announcement,” his dad said, arresting the movements of everyone in the room. “The Yule Ball will be held on Christmas Day. It will begin at eight o'clock. You will wear dress robes.” His dad looked at each of them to make sure these instructions were received. Harry assiduously did not look at Cedric. He didn't want to know if the other boy was looking at him. “You are now dismissed. Evans, you will stay.”

Harry walked to his dad's desk, waiting quietly as his classmates left the room. He had not purchased dress robes, having had no intention of wearing them. Jasmine and Adrian were the last to leave, both looking at him before the door closed behind them.

“You are required to have a partner,” his dad said with a faint sneer. “A *dance* partner.”

“Like hell I will,” Harry said.

“It is not negotiable,” his dad said. “Tradition dictates the school champions will acquire partners, and will open the festivities with a dance.”

“Does it have to be a girl?” Harry asked.

“The headmaster would not require such a thing,” his dad said.

“Tradition also dictates there are only three champions,” Harry pointed out. “Is Potter meant to *acquire a partner*?”

“Yes,” his dad said, looking disgusted by the entire affair. “I believe McGonagall is informing him at this moment.”

“Great,” Harry said flatly. “I don't know how to dance. I don't even know who I would ask.” He knew who he *wanted* to ask, but it wasn't an option.

His dad had a sour look when he said, “Neither you nor Potter will have any difficulty in that regard.”

The entire school had learned of the Yule Ball by dinner. Harry didn't feel up to dealing with it, choosing to spend part of dinner in the library. To his dismay, Viktor was there, lurking and being followed by people working up the nerve to ask him to the Yule Ball.

Harry was alone at his table, half-heartedly flipping through a book on freshwater spirits. Kelpies, grindylows, kappas, nixies and nymphs. His friends' impromptu study group had fallen apart rather quickly. Half of them had quidditch, he and Jasmine were prefects, Phoebe's Frog Choir practice was ramping up for the ball, and they still had classes to attend, essays to write, new spells to master. There wasn't much to study for the Second Task. Harry knew the Bubble Head Charm, he knew how to swim. He only needed to get into the Black Lake and start blasting.

Harry, Viktor, and the giggling girls weren't the only ones forgoing dinner. Monty was there, with Ron and Hermione. Harry had been in the unenviable position of hearing Ron debating whether to ask Viktor for an autograph, and Hermione musing about getting into the kitchens. He had been planning on eating in the kitchens, and hoped no one had told Hermione how to get to them. He doubted Monty had.

Deciding to get ahead of them, Harry closed his book and left it on the table. As he was walking away, he glanced back to see a red-haired blur dart to his table, seize the book, and retreat. Shaking his head, Harry left the library.

It wasn't a long walk to the kitchens, though Harry did have to sidle past the doors of the Great Hall to get there, hurrying down the steps leading to the Hufflepuff basement. He knew he needed to find a dance partner. Not attending the Yule Ball was unthinkable, even if he had not been a champion. He was a prefect, and hoped to be Head Boy. He had to put his best foot forward, as a representative of Hogwarts. Ideally, he would attend with someone from Durmstrang or Beauxbatons, but chances were slim of finding another boy from one of those schools who was also gay. He *could* go with a girl, and he already had someone in mind if it came down to it.

Leaving the matter for later, Harry reached the portrait of the fruit bowl, tickled the pear, and entered the kitchens.

Monty reluctantly followed Hermione to the kitchens. The attention on him had drastically increased since the announcement of the Yule Ball, and he had wanted a break from it. That meant the library, but between Hermione complaining about Krum and Ron fawning over him, it hadn't been the break Monty had hoped for. Then Ron's cousin Mafalda had appeared, bringing books on water creatures and talking a mile a minute about what the Second Task could be. Monty hadn't told Hermione yet, nor Ron for that matter, still uncertain whether he wanted them involved. He didn't want Hermione to take over his studying, or to deal with Ron's groaning about being made to learn. Mafalda had blown the whole thing wide open, letting them know what *Captain Evans* was reading. Monty was amused that she called Harry by his title, even when, in her mind, she was betraying him.

For the whole walk to the kitchens Ron complained about S.P.E.W., about putting the house-elves off their cooking, insisting they liked their lot in life, on and on. Fred and George had said much the same, as had many others. None of them considered that some house-elves acted happy so their masters wouldn't beat them. And those that were abused often believed they deserved the treatment.

While Monty was glad Hermione had finally decided to actually speak with a house-elf—which didn't address her treating house-elves as if they were all the same, that talking to one was the same as talking to all of them—he wished Fred and George hadn't spilled where the kitchens were. It was one of the few places Monty could get some space from the other students. It was something Harry had shown him and Luna. The kitchens were special, another secret of Hogwarts. Hermione knowing where they were felt like an intrusion, even as Monty realized it was selfish of him to think that way.

Monty's spirits lifted when they discovered someone was already in the kitchens.

"What are you doing here?" Hermione demanded.

Harry looked up from what was clearly his dinner. He had a book open in one hand, and didn't seem surprised to see them.

“I could ask the same thing,” Harry said, setting his book down. “Students aren’t allowed in the kitchens.”

“You’re a student,” Ron pointed out.

“I’m a prefect,” Harry said. “It’s like being a student, except better.”

Ron gave him a dirty look, while Hermione looked uncertain. Monty imagined she was now considering that Fred and George going to the kitchens was an indicator that it might not be allowed.

Drawing herself up, Hermione said, “I just wanted to speak with the house-elves.”

Harry looked away from them, to the dozens of house-elves running around the kitchen. Sending plates up on the tables that mirrored the ones in the Great Hall, receiving used dishes, washing, cooking, cleaning, generally busy working.

“Take your pick,” Harry said, just as a house-elf materialized in front of Monty and his friends, tugging on her bat-like ears. Monty recognized her right away.

“Do misters and miss need anything?” Flopsy asked eagerly. “Did they miss dinner? What can Flopsy get them?”

“No, we don’t need anything,” Hermione began, while Ron said, “Yeah, I’m starving!” A group of house-elves was already hurrying towards them, bearing a large silver platter laden with food. Soon, Monty was sat at the same table as Harry, who looked vaguely amused by the entire situation.

“Thank you, Flopsy,” Monty said, making her blush.

“Flopsy is happy to be of service to Monty Potter,” Flopsy said. “Miss Luna visits sometimes!”

Monty smiled to himself. Like him, Luna probably felt that she fit in better with the house-elves than with other humans. She liked being around happiness, and the Hogwarts house-elves, despite their servitude, were happier there than at their former homes.

“Hang on,” Hermione said, turning angrily towards him. “Have you been here before?”

“House-elves aren’t trapped in the kitchens, Hermione,” Monty said, not wanting to deal with it. “Dobby visited me in the hospital wing after Lockhart vanished my bones.”

Flopsy started tugging her ears again. “Dobby doesn’t live here. Dobby was a bad elf, following Monty Potter!”

“What does that mean?” Hermione asked her gently, her attitude completely switching. “Your name is Flopsy, right? What does *bad elf* mean?”

“You don’t have to talk to her like she’s an idiot,” Harry said, not looking up from his book. “Or a child. Flopsy, how old are you?”

“Flopsy is two hundred and seven,” she said, looking nervously between him and Hermione.

“Do you have time to answer Granger’s questions?” Harry asked. “I know you lot are busy.”

Flopsy nodded. “We know Miss Granger talks about house-elves and has many questions.”

Hermione looked taken aback. “You know? How?”

“We read the *Daily Prophet*, miss,” Flopsy said. “And we house-elves hear lots of things when we’re cleaning the castle. Lots and lots of things! But we keep our masters’ secrets. That’s the pride and privilege of a house-elf!”

Monty held back a grimace at Hermione’s obvious surprise. Did she think house-elves were illiterate?

“Well, have fun,” Harry said, smiling at a house-elf who hurried forward to take his used dishes. He picked up his book and began walking towards the exit. “And try to treat the house-elves with *some* dignity. It’s disgusting to see you infantilize them, Granger. You treat house-elves the same way wizards treat muggles.”

With that, Harry left the kitchens. Hermione looked stricken, while Ron went red as a boiled lobster.

“Who does he think he is, talking to Hermione like that?” Ron demanded

“A prefect?” Monty hazarded. Feeling peckish, Monty ignored Ron’s indignant look and began making up a plate for himself. Hermione eventually recovered, and began asking Flopsy questions in a more normal tone, like she was talking to a peer. Given Hermione had a tendency to talk down to her peers, Monty wasn’t sure it was much of an improvement. She was always so surprised when someone treated her in the same way, like Harry had. It was worse than when a professor did, since they were adults and Hermione always respected and deferred to adults. And prefects, though Harry seemed to be an exception. He didn’t sugarcoat things for Hermione.

Monty knew Hermione was the oldest in their year, having a birthday in early September. She was almost a year older than himself, which he realized meant she was only a year younger than Harry. Monty didn’t know how aware Hermione was of this, but he couldn’t help but think it factored in. Having someone your own age, or close to it, telling you were wrong was much more humiliating. It was worse, because Hermione had never given a wrong answer in class. She could quote things verbatim from their textbooks. The only times Monty could recall her interacting with Harry involved Harry telling Hermione she was wrong.

Monty pushed his food around the plate. He thought Hermione and Harry could get along, if she got over herself and accepted that people who were smarter and better read than her existed. She was too annoyed at being wrong to see that Harry was trying to help her. Monty doubted Ron would ever get along with Harry. Not only was he a prefect, but he was friends with Percy. Of all his brothers, Ron liked Percy the least. Harry was guilty by association.

Neither of them knew he was friends with Harry. Luna did, and Monty was sure Neville suspected, but both had nothing but nice things to say about Harry.

Monty sighed, half-listening as Hermione interrogated Flopsy about her day-to-day life. It didn't really matter what Hermione and Ron thought about Harry. They rarely interacted as it was. He thought maybe seeing Harry take on a Hungarian Horntail might have changed things, but Hermione had been focused on house-elves, and Ron was resentful of the Slytherin champion representing Hogwarts.

Nothing had changed.

“Who are you going to ask?”

Harry, who had been carefully trimming the griptape on his skateboard, looked up. The question, he knew, was inevitable, but he was relieved to see it was Cassius who Terence was asking. They were all in their dormitory, getting ready for bed.

“To the Yule Ball?” Cassius asked. He had a tarot spread on his bed, and tapped one of the cards. It was The Chariot, being driven by a rather intimidating woman in armor. “Haruka Endo.”

“From Hufflepuff?” Harry asked, knowing perfectly well who Haruka Endo was. She was the other Hufflepuff sixth-year prefect, a gobstones player, and one of Cedric's drooling sycophants.

“Her mother is an ambassador,” Cassius said.

“Have you already asked her?” Terence asked.

“No,” Cassius said, still looking thoughtfully at the card. He drew another card, and laid The Star across The Chariot. “The outlook is good. She will perceive it as a way of getting back at Harry, for both his having the audacity to date Cedric Diggory and be better at gobstones.”

“So it's a networking opportunity,” Harry said, smiling to himself. He didn't care who Cassius, or anyone else, went with. He *would* get a good laugh if it was Haruka Endo.

“The entire Yule Ball is,” Cassius pointed out. “Since you asked me, what about you, Terence?”

Terence sank onto his bed, looking a little sick. “That first-year Prewett asked me.”

“What the fuck?” Harry said, while Adrian started laughing. “She's eleven!”

“I said no, for fuck's sake,” Terence said. “I think that's the worst thing that's ever happened to me.”

“Lucky you,” Harry said, drawing a look from Cassius. “She’s been following me around since Halloween. I bet she thinks she can get information out of you.”

“What information?” Terence asked.

“Oh, does she fancy Harry instead?” Adrian asked, still laughing.

Harry shook his head, not wanting to indulge him. He remembered how Mafalda had reacted at being sorted into Slytherin, when everyone else in her recently acquired family was in Gryffindor. He doubted it was about him at all.

“Well, what about *you*?” Terence asked Adrian. “Are you going to grow a pair and ask Jasmine?”

Adrian stopped laughing. It was a glorious thing to see.

“I bet some bloke from Beauxbatons’ already got his eye on her,” Harry said offhandedly. “*Excusez-moi, mademoiselle*, and all that.”

“Those French fucks,” Adrian muttered. “That’s grand. I bet one of those birds from Durmstrang speaks a little Russian.”

“Don’t be a total idiot, Adrian,” Cassius said. “No one from Durmstrang is interested in your *little Russian*.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Adrian exclaimed. “By the way, Endo’s a slag.”

“No, she’s saving herself for Diggory,” Cassius said, drawing another card. The Knight of Cups.

“Even better,” Adrian said, “a desperate slag!”

“What about you, Harry?” Terence asked, talking over Adrian. “You’ve got to take someone, yeah?”

“I have to open the ball with a dance,” Harry said, slicing off a strip of griptape. “I shall be taking my skateboard.”

“Snape would lose his shit,” Adrian said gleefully.

“I haven’t got dress robes either,” Harry said. “I’ll go in my pants.”

“Very bold,” Cassius said, looking up at him. “Maybe you’ll finally get in the *Daily Prophet*.”

“I’m hoping for a spread in *Witch Weekly*,” Harry said.

“Seriously, though,” Terence said. “Who are you going to take?”

“I’ll go with him,” Adrian declared, throwing himself at Harry’s bed. “Since he can’t go with his boyfriend.”

“I haven’t got a boyfriend,” Harry said airily. “Yet.”

Cassius shook his head, looking back at his three card spread. “You’re going to ask Astrid, aren’t you?”

Terence adopted a thoughtful expression. “It’s a safe choice. I might have asked Phoebe to go as friends, but her and Jasmine were giggling at those blokes from Beauxbatons.”

“You what?” Adrian demanded. “You were serious, then?”

“Yeah,” Terence said with an evil grin, “best get a move on.”

“Bloody hell,” Adrian said, racing out of the dormitory. A moment later, there was a grating, blaring sound like a siren going off, followed by a lot of angry shouting.

Shaking his head, Terence looked at Harry. “Shame you can’t go with Weasley. I reckon he would know how to dance. Astrid’s more likely to tackle you.”

Harry went back to fixing up his skateboard. “That’s what I’m counting on.”

Chicken

Chapter Summary

December 1994

Last day of term

On the last day of term, Snape tested them on antidotes. Having successfully handled Snape's fake poisoning, Monty was fairly confident he had made a decent antidote. He had finished well before the rest of the class, and while normally he would be helping Neville, it was a test. Instead, Snape allowed Monty to work on his flying seahorse potion. The ones Professor Grubbly-Plank had been healing were already back with the herd, flying over the Black Lake. Monty was still working on developing a potion, though he knew he might be months, even years from completing it.

Even though he was not supposed to help Neville, he couldn't help but whisper, "Bezoar." Neville, who had terrible test anxiety, reached for the bezoar so quickly he accidentally smacked it across the room. Snape looked up from the essays he was grading, narrowing his eyes at them.

"Sorry, professor," Neville stuttered, nearly falling out of his chair in his haste to retrieve the bezoar. Snape turned his black gaze on Monty. Monty looked innocently back, which only seemed to fuel Snape's suspicion.

Monty decided he ought to keep his head down, and went back to extracting oil from premature flutterby blossoms. Neville returned with the bezoar and began carefully shaving it.

"Thanks, Monty," he whispered. "This ball is really getting to me."

"Yeah," Monty said. The week before end of term had been wild. There were roving packs of girls everywhere, grouping up to giggle at Monty as he walked by. Multiple girls had approached him to ask him to the Yule Ball, none of whom he had known, ever spoken to, or even recognized. Almost everyone over fourth-year had signed up to stay for the holiday, and most of the younger students too. Everyone was talking about who asked who, who was going to ask who, much like the lead up to the Triwizard Tournament, and about as interesting.

Monty felt particularly stressed as McGonagall had insisted he open the Yule Ball with the other champions. She had brooked no argument; it didn't matter to her that he had not put his name in, that he wasn't a proper champion. Not even his promise to tell Sirius about it had

fazed her. She had known Sirius since he was a student, and wasn't impressed by his checkered past. McGonagall had been in the front seat for most of it.

"Have you asked anyone yet?" Monty asked.

Neville sighed. "Hermione," he muttered, "but she says she's already going with someone. What about you? Have you asked Luna?"

Monty tore a flutterby petal. "What?"

"She's a third-year, so she can't go unless you ask," Neville said. "That's why I asked Ginny."

"I need to find Luna," Monty said, feeling like an idiot. Of course he would go with Luna. She was his friend. It was the perfect solution. And he knew she loved to dance, she did it all the time. "Hold on," he said, "Ginny? I thought you'd ask Hannah."

Neville wilted. "She's going with Anthony Goldstein from Ravenclaw. They're partners in Potions."

"As fascinating as this conversation is," Professor Snape said from behind them, scaring the shit out of Monty, "Longbottom *does* have an antidote to complete. Potter, if you continue to be a distraction to other students, I will no longer permit you to work on your project in class."

"Yes, sir," Monty said humbly.

Snape sighed, then stepped around their table to look into Monty's cauldron, and at the glass tube he had positioned over it.

"You are doing a steam distillation," Snape said. "Presumably to extract a higher concentration?"

Monty nodded.

Snape raised an eyebrow, but made no further comment. Taking this for approval, Monty continued adding flutterby bits to his cauldron.

When class was over, Monty had a vial of flutterby essential oil. He went to Gryffindor Tower with everyone else to drop off his things, but begged off going to dinner. Instead, he grabbed the Marauder's Map and went in search of Luna. It was a pain, especially during day time when the castle was swarming with little dots, but Monty had a general idea of where Luna might be. Her last class was Charms, but she wasn't in the Charms corridor. Nor was she in Ravenclaw Tower. He looked around the Forbidden Forest, though only the edge of it was on the map. It was only Hagrid, Fang, abraxan, Madame Maxime, and Beauxbaton students. Finally, he looked at the Owlery and smiled.

Monty hurried through the castle, fighting down his nerves. He appreciated how bold the girls who approached him had been, asking him to go on a date. It was a lot easier to go as friends, like Neville had tried with Hermione. The stakes were lower.

He took the spiral staircase two steps at a time, his blood racing. What if she said no?

Monty finally reached the top of the stairs, panting. The Owlery was freezing cold, the open windows letting in the winter weather. Many owls were huddled in nests and hollows, their perches transformed for the season. One owl was in her element.

Hedwig was happily eating owl treats out of Luna's palm. Luna looked like a fairy, wind and snow flurries whipping her pale hair around. Monty stared at her, unable to form words now that he was there. What was he doing again?

"Hello, Fleamont," Luna said, turning to smile at him. Hedwig began grooming Luna's flyaway hair, having consumed all the treats. "Would you like to go to the Yule Ball with me?"

"Astrid."

"What?"

"Do you want to go to the Yule Ball with me?"

"Aye."

"See?" Harry said to Adrian, who had been watching raptly. "Easy as that."

Harry smiled at Astrid, who didn't seem very happy about the arrangement. Her hair was now a light fuzz, and her ears stuck out slightly. She looked like a colicky baby.

"Alright," Adrian said, glancing at the entrance to the Great Hall. Jasmine had yet to come to dinner. Harry hoped she hadn't taken a side quest to the Beauxbatons carriage.

"You're going together?" Phoebe asked, looking between Harry and Astrid. "But, Astrid, weren't you—"

"But nothing," Astrid said heatedly. "Haz needs a dance partner. I will dance."

"Why does that sound like a threat?" Harry asked, worried that Astrid already had someone in mind. If that was the case, he needed another plan. Maybe Killian would take one for the team.

Adrian tensed as Jasmine walked into the Great Hall, along with Cassius and Terence.

"They've gone down to the Durmstrang ship," Harry suggested. "They've walked the plank."

"If she says no, I'll ask Eloise Midgen," Adrian boldly stated. "She's been looking for a date."

“She’s cute,” Phoebe said, looking away from Astrid. “A little scary how she keeps cursing herself.” She leaned in, mischief lighting her eyes. “Did you hear? Cedric Diggory asked Cho Chang!”

“No, I hadn’t,” Harry said. “Can I unhear it?”

“And Fred Weasley asked Angelina Johnson!”

“Ah, yes,” Cassius said, sitting down with them. “The thrilling saga of quidditch players dating each other.”

Astrid stabbed her jacket potato, scowling as sour cream shot out. Jasmine took one look at her and found a seat further away. Adrian abruptly stood, knocking his goblet of pumpkin juice over. Harry discreetly vanished the mess.

“Jasmine,” he said, rather loudly.

“What?” she asked, giving him a startled look.

“Uh...” Adrian’s face went strangely blank. Harry poked him with his fork. “Uh, right. Want to go to the Yule Ball?”

“With you?” Jasmine asked, looking him over. Sighing, she said, “Fine.”

“Don’t sound too excited about it,” Harry said, drawing a dark look from her.

Phoebe began squealing. “Oh, I can’t wait to go to Hogsmeade! It’s going to be so fun! You are going, aren’t you, Harry?”

“I was going to the library tomorrow,” Harry began.

Phoebe slammed the table. Felipe, in a panic, hopped into a tureen of gravy. “No! It’s Christmas! No studying!”

“Jesus, fine,” Harry said, glancing at Astrid. Astrid was still attacking her potato. “I’ll go to Hogsmeade if it’s so important to you.” He had already got some presents for his friends, but it wouldn’t hurt to look around.

Dinner proceeded mostly as usual, though Adrian had lost all coordination and Jasmine already looked like she regretted saying yes. Cassius stared at the Hufflepuff table, and Harry was worried he was trying to hypnotize Haruka Endo into making the first move. Mafalda was staring daggers at Terence, who looked like he wanted to die. Harry had caught her trying to get into their dormitory, and as punishment had confiscated the camera. She was glaring at him too.

After dinner, while walking across the entrance hall, Harry was accosted.

“Evans,” Fleur Delacour said. Harry hadn’t seen much of her since the First Task, and was a little surprised she had deigned to grace the castle with her presence.

“Hello,” he said, watching in confusion as she walked right up to him.

“It is good to see you,” she said with a slight smile.

“Thanks,” Harry said, observing with no small amusement that others who had stopped to watch this exchange had begun going glassy-eyed. Astrid, who had been walking next to him, smiled in a very un-Astrid-like way.

“This Yule Ball is soon,” Fleur said, tossing her silvery hair around. Heads moved in tandem to watch it. It reminded Harry of how Lady Madeleine acted when he teased her with a feather.

“Yeah, in a week,” Harry said. He thought about saying he was going with Astrid, then thought about Astrid attempting to strangle him into silence to impress Fleur. People had apparently tried to jump into the stadium at the Quidditch World Cup, as well as set themselves on fire, attempt spells they didn’t know, drink copious amounts, and various other things that would kill them, in response to the veelas’ enchantment.

“You will escort me,” Fleur declared, her smile growing. The intensity of her focus was unnerving, even without being affected by her magic.

“Yeah, about that,” Harry said, wondering if he would be the first person to ever reject the girl. “You’re barking up the wrong tree, mate.”

Fleur’s brow furrowed, though she was still smiling. “I am sorry, this is a saying I am not familiar with.”

Harry sighed. He was going to have to spell it out for her. “I’m—”

“Will you go to the ball with me?”

Harry turned to look at Ronald Weasley, who had been walking through the entrance hall with his sister. His sister, who had been trying to keep him away, only to be pulled along for the show.

Fleur slowly turned to look at Ron, amazingly giving the impression she was looking down on him despite the height difference. She said nothing, only stared at Ron with an expression of utter disgust.

Ron stared right back, going so red Harry was genuinely concerned for his health. Then he turned on his heel and sprinted away, stumbling on the grand staircase as a few people began to laugh.

Harry watched him go, then turned back to Fleur. “That was weird. Anyway, I’m sorry, but I prefer men. Have a nice evening.”

If Ron’s behavior had upset Fleur, she looked absolutely outraged at having been turned down. Not wanting to discover if Fleur had also inherited a fireball shooting ability, Harry seized Astrid and dragged her away.

Severus watched the commotion in the entrance hall, wishing he had never looked up from his dinner.

“She’s a pretty one,” Charity said musingly as Delacour shook out her hair to better entrance his son. “Not too bright, though, if she’s targeting Dragon Killer Evans.”

“The dragon was unharmed,” Severus was compelled to point out.

Charity smiled at him, batting her eyes. “Severus.”

Severus looked away. “We will be chaperoning the event. The indignities visited upon me shall never cease.”

“We’re still allowed to dance,” Charity said in a low voice, nudging him. She kept nudging and winking.

“Are you having a stroke?” Severus finally asked.

“On the dance floor,” Charity said, beaming at him. “Or maybe after, if you’re lucky. What are you wearing?”

Severus closed his eyes. Dancing in front of his students. As Head of House, he was obligated to set an example. He could not expect his son to dance properly if he refused to do the same.

“Robes,” he said.

“Wear something nice,” Charity said, piercing him with her gaze, “or I’ll transfigure it in front of everyone.”

Having duly threatened him, Charity happily went back to her dinner. Severus shuddered, and decided it was time to expand his wardrobe.

Monty was trying to get a head start on his holiday homework, but he was still shaky from Luna asking him to the Yule Ball. She even promised to teach him how to dance, which was a huge relief. He didn’t want to make a fool of himself in front of the entire school.

Getting hold of himself, he picked up where he had left off on his essay on switching spells. Switching spells were odd, as they didn’t actually switch two things. It was transfiguring two

things at once to make one look like the other. It did make trying on outfits easier, which Monty made a note of.

The portrait hole opened, and Monty looked up to see Ginny carrying Ron in. He looked like he was going to start vomiting slugs. Ginny, on the other hand, looked positively delighted.

“What happened?” Monty asked.

Ron stared at him vacantly, then began flailing and ranting. Monty gleaned he had asked Fleur Delacour to the Yule Ball. Delacour, who it seemed had been asking Harry.

“Reckon she doesn’t know he’s gay,” Monty said musingly. “Well, now she does.”

“What about you?” Ron asked, having calmed down. “What’ve you been smiling about?”

“Oh,” Monty said, smiling guiltily. “I’m going with Luna.”

“With *Loony*?” Ron said. “Really? Am I the only one who hasn’t got anyone? Well, except for Neville. Do you know he asked Hermione? He told me at dinner. Neville said she’s already going with someone, but it’s obvious why she’d say that. Who’d want to go with Neville?”

As Ron began laughing, Monty glanced at Ginny. She was no longer smiling, and had gone rather pale.

Monty began packing up his things.

“What are you doing?” asked Ron, still laughing slightly.

“I’ve got quidditch practice,” Monty said, feeling vindictive pleasure at Ron’s smile fading. He still hadn’t got over not making the team. “And you’re being an arse. Her name’s *Luna*. Just because you’ve been rejected doesn’t mean you get to take it out on the rest of us.”

Monty walked away from Ron and Ginny, the latter of whom he knew was upset about him going with Luna. The crush, or hero worship, was becoming old. As he made his way across the common room, Monty stopped by Fred and George to let them know they ought to get ready. They were huddled over another letter, giggling. Monty leaned over to look.

He nearly dropped his books. Fred and George had somehow got pictures from inside the Slytherin common room, a large number of which featured Harry.

“The fuck is that about?” Monty demanded.

The twins looked up at him with matching grins.

“Another gift from our man on the inside,” George said.

“Who?” Monty asked, though he felt a sinking sensation. He knew who it was.

“Mafalda,” Fred said easily.

“We asked for pictures,” George said.

Monty frowned. “You fancy Evans? Strange way of showing it.”

“No,” Fred said quickly. “It’s...for a project.”

Monty's frown deepened. He'd have to find a way to tell Harry about this.

“We’ve got practice,” he finally said.

“Shit,” George said, gathering up the pictures. “We’ve got to get to the Owlery.”

“Are you the ones sending pictures to Skeeter?” Monty asked, his anger growing. First Ron taking the piss out of Luna, Neville, and Hermione. Now Fred and George using their cousin to spy on Slytherins? On Harry? Monty had been mostly ignoring the little first-year, but it was getting out of hand.

“Of course not,” Fred said, helping George stuff the pictures into an envelope. They had another letter, but Monty couldn’t see who it was addressed to. “You’re being a real nosy git, Monty. Why do you care anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Monty said, crossing his arms. “Maybe years of people following me around taking photos?”

George grimaced. “It’s not like that.”

“Trust us,” Fred said, smiling again. “It’s for a good cause.”

Monty watched the twins run off, feeling angry and completely useless. He wasn’t a prefect, he couldn’t confiscate things. He could have fought Fred and George, but it would have been two on one and would have got everyone’s attention. It was already suspicious of him to care, and the twins had noticed that.

Frustrated, Monty stormed up to his dormitory. He’d tell Harry. He’d sort it.

The chicken Harry had conjured scratched at the stone floor, pecking at the grain he’d scattered about. He had no idea what breed of chicken it was. It was a plump bird, so he assumed it was a hen. She had a white body, with grey feathers around her neck and tail. She clucked around, with no knowledge of what was to come.

Harry crouched at the other side of the room. He’d brought his skateboard with for an alibi. There was no reason for him to be in the dungeons with a chicken.

Astrid hadn’t seemed happy about going to the Yule Ball as friends, which was fine, Harry wasn’t keen on dancing around with her either as part of some shit tradition. He knew they

would have fun, though, and that Astrid was looking forward to seeing the Weird Sisters. Harry also knew she still felt guilty about putting his name in the Goblet of Fire, about using the Imperius. She felt like she owed it to him. But what Phoebe had said, how Astrid had acted, made him think there was someone she had intended to ask. That was a big deal.

He didn't want to punish her.

Harry sighed, then looked at the wand in his hand. His wand. Eleven inches, pine, phoenix feather. Flexible. More flexible than when Harry had first got it. It was his wand, and it had chosen him.

The Killing Curse. *Avada Kedavra*. An ancient spell, one that fulfilled a simple wish.

Death.

Something had happened the night his mum had been murdered. Something that left his little brother with a scar. Harry had only been researching for a few months, when he should have started the moment he stepped foot into Hogwarts. He was wary of asking his dad what he knew, not wanting to tip him off.

The chicken pecked at a crack in the floor.

The issue, something he had realized once he bothered thinking about it, was the scar was the result of the Killing Curse failing. The Dark Lord Voldemort, one of the most powerful wizards in the past century, possibly millenium, had cast it, yet it had failed. This failure resulted in Monty's scar, and the destruction of the Dark Lord's body. It had left him a wraith. If Harry wanted that chicken to have a similar scar, the Killing Curse would have to fail. He might have to kill hundreds of chickens, thousands, until it did. And when it did fail, it would destroy him.

Harry's grip on his wand tightened.

There was a knock on the door.

With a thought, the chicken, the grain, were gone. Vanished, as if they had never been there. Harry's skin prickled as he walked to the door. He put his wand in a pocket, made sure his breathing was steady. He opened the door.

Monty stood there, his face peeking out of his invisibility cloak. He looked upset.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, his voice even.

Monty swallowed, then said, "Can I talk to you about something?"

Accoutrements

Chapter Summary

December 1994

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Severus woke to another scratch at his door. Sighing, he abandoned the comfort of his bed and hoped his son hadn't done anything stupid.

When he opened the door, the cat was the first in, brushing past Severus as if he wasn't there. Harry was next, his eyes distant, deep in thought.

Severus shut the door, retrieving his wand. He quickly ran through spells ensuring his son hadn't been followed, silencing his already silent quarters, offering what protections he could.

"What has happened?" he asked.

Harry stopped in the middle of the room, his cat winding between his legs. Oddly, she was not purring as she often did when his son was upset. Severus crossed his arms, waiting.

Slowly, Harry turned around. "Does the headmaster know what connects my brother and the Dark Lord?"

"If he does, he has not shared that information with me," Severus replied. "I am not privy to all of the headmaster's secrets. He may take me into his confidence regarding certain matters, but Dumbledore has always been inscrutable."

His son's face remained blank. "Have you ever killed anyone?"

Severus met his son's eyes. "Yes."

Harry nodded to himself, then looked away. "I need to know what happened to Monty that night. I need to know why he is in this tournament. I can't..."

Harry grabbed his hair, sinking to the ground, his breathing frantic. The cat circled him.

Severus moved.

His son was having a panic attack. He had seen students have them in the past, and had always thought them weak. Who would panic so much that their brain stopped working? That

they made themselves so disabled? He had seen his mother have them, had stood by and done nothing. Curled up on the floor, hyperventilating, crying, his father kicking her over, and over, and over.

Seeing his own child like this was terrifying.

He knelt next to Harry, who had begun shaking, feeling less than useless. He only had potions to offer. Harry's eyes were wild. The cat meowed plaintively, pawing at him. A Calming Draught flew across the room. Harry was in no state of mind to take it. Severus had to carefully untangle Harry's hands from his hair, force the vial into them.

"Okay," Harry said under his breath, his chest heaving with the effort. "Okay. It's okay. I'm going to be okay."

Severus felt he was witnessing something he had no right to. How many times had Harry told himself that? He imagined a little boy alone in his house, the pressure of so many secrets weighing down his soul.

Harry quickly downed the Calming Draught, and the effect was not as instantaneous as Severus had hoped. He grimaced, then placed a hand on Harry's back, hoping to soothe the boy. What had precipitated this?

"I have done many things in service to the Dark Lord," Severus said. "In my role as a spy. A spy is only effective so long as no one knows he is one. If you are not useful to the Dark Lord, there is no purpose in your existence. Before he...made the decision to target your mother, I was loyal. Deeply, irrevocably loyal."

Harry nodded again, his breathing slowing. He sat back. The cat climbed onto his lap. He looked straight ahead, seeing nothing.

Harry took a deep, shuddering breath, then asked, "Killing Curse?"

Severus' hand stilled on his son's back. "No. Such curses leave an indelible stain on the caster. I was not that far gone." His expression hardened, his son's present condition taking on a harsh clarity. "What have you done?"

"Nothing," Harry said brokenly. "I've done nothing." His face crumbled. "Dad, I don't know what to do."

Severus shifted so he could look into Harry's eyes, shining with tears that had yet to fall. He looked so young. Severus reminded himself that Harry was still, in many ways, a child. A child who rarely revealed anything unintentionally. Who tried to calculate every move. Who Severus had trained in the mind arts, something suitable for such a secretive boy.

"Tell me what happened," he said, wanting his son to trust him.

Harry looked down, exhaling. Then Harry told him.

Harry pulled his mother's cloak around himself, watching the snow steadily fall over the quidditch pitch. The practice was more subdued than usual. Astrid was almost lethargic, moving mechanically as she tossed the quaffle back to Adrian. She hadn't made the entire team get up, just the starters, the older students. It was the first day of holiday, and it seemed she had found it in her heart to give them a break. The grounds were still dark, and Harry had conjured balls of cool, bluish white light to hover above the pitch. It reminded him of the car park at Tesco.

Lady Madeleine was having fun in the snow, jumping after flakes, burying herself in snow drifts. Snow settled around Harry like a blanket, its weight hardly felt. The cold didn't touch him. He hadn't slept at all. He was angry with himself. Disappointed. His dad had stayed up with him, even though he still had to work, was tired from teaching so many classes, so many students. He needed a holiday, but he had listened to Harry's garbled, flawed logic. He knew things about the dark arts that the books didn't contain. He knew that spells like the Killing Curse, black magic, death magic, affected the soul.

The wind swept through Harry, dark strands of hair whipping around his face.

Harry felt like an idiot. He knew souls existed. Dementors ate them. Hogwarts was filled with ghosts. Voldemort was some sort of soul construct, something that retained its sentience but not its physical form. Harry knew something of it from his research into thestrals, trying to discover why only those who had witnessed death could see the skeletal horses.

"I was told the practices were more spirited."

Harry looked up to see Professor Lupin sitting nearby.

"It's holiday," Harry said quietly. "The next game's in January. Come back then, it'll be mad."

Professor Lupin nodded, watching as Terence flew close to the ground, snow whisked up around him. "How have you been, Harry?"

"I'm fine, professor," Harry said, smiling as Lady Madeleine launched herself, legs splayed, into a pile of snow. Harry looked at Professor Lupin, glad to see he was properly dressed for the weather in a thick cloak and red scarf. He looked younger than he had the year before, less beaten down.

"I've been missing your visits to my office," Professor Lupin said. "It seems Severus has found a new assistant."

"I'm not much of a potioneer," Harry said. Lady Madeleine reappeared, shaking snow off herself then taking a break to lick her back.

"It's a good opportunity for Monty," Professor Lupin said. "Hogwarts is lucky to have someone as skilled as Severus teaching Potions. I did worry Severus might have some... animosity towards Monty."

Harry was too tired, and couldn't think of a good response. Everything felt like he was walking himself into a trap. He said nothing.

"That's a very nice cloak you have," Professor Lupin said.

"Thank you," Harry said dully, wishing he had charmed it black. He doubted Lupin recognized the cloak, given his mother had last worn it seventeen years prior. It looked like any other simple wool cloak. It only stood out for being nicer than Harry's other clothing. Still, the cloak was a connection to her, one Harry could not let go of. "It was a gift. I suspect my friends will be getting me a similar gift later today."

Professor Lupin smiled warmly. "You're going to Hogsmeade?"

"Against my better judgment."

Professor Lupin chuckled, then turned back to watch the practice. "You're not looking forward to it, I take it?"

"I'd rather prepare for the Second Task," Harry said. It was only partially true. He had a new direction to take his research in. His dad suspected the headmaster knew more than he let on, but Harry could not put the same trust in the man as his father did. He didn't know if he could ever trust anyone with Monty's life.

Professor Lupin glanced at him. "Do you need to? You showed remarkable aptitude against the Hungarian Horntail."

"She was one dragon," Harry said softly, no longer paying attention to the quidditch practice. If Professor Lupin was suspicious, regardless of what specifically he was suspicious about, he would have to deal with that too. Or ask his dad for help. He'd probably enjoy threatening Professor Lupin.

"Monty was very impressed by your performance," Professor Lupin said.

Harry ducked his head, hiding his face. "Potter is too easily impressed, then."

"He speaks very highly of you," Professor Lupin continued.

"Does he?" Harry said, his anxiety growing. He didn't need this, whatever Professor Lupin was doing. "That's odd, I've rarely spoken to him."

"I think we both know that's not true, Harry," Professor Lupin said quietly. He stood, brushing snow from his robes. "It looks like practice is almost over. I'll see you at breakfast, Harry."

Harry said nothing, silently watching as Professor Lupin walked along the benches, then disappeared down a staircase.

Lady Madeleine appeared near his feet, her tail twitching in agitation.

"Meow."

“Don’t bother,” Harry said. “He’s too clever for that. I’ve just got to be more careful.”

Professor Lupin had been right. Astrid was signaling for the team to land. Harry stood, then followed the path Professor Lupin had taken, back to the castle.

Percy sighed in relief, releasing the skin he had pinched on his thigh. When his parents still gave him injections, before he was old enough to insist he could do it himself, his father would sometimes forget to change the spot, leaving little lumps that were painful to the touch. His mother always remembered, though.

He took a moment to simply enjoy the feeling. Parting with so much gold had been distressing, but it was worth it to not constantly feel on the verge of collapse. Percy could actually enjoy a day off. He had an entire day to himself. He could read a book, finish writing a letter to Harry. He could go shopping for robes; he had a meeting with the Transylvanian Head of Magical Cooperation in a few weeks, and wanted to look his best. Even his parents were more tolerable, now that they weren’t being filtered through a disoriented haze. He could think clearly. It was glorious.

With a start, Percy realized he was in a good mood. Feeling rebellious, Percy dressed in trousers and a jumper, a small smile forming on his face when he imagined what Harry might think of it. He walked downstairs, still reveling at his bones and muscles not aching with every step. It was the sort of dull, constant pain that he had long stopped noticing, but its absence was profound.

In the kitchen, his mother was humming along with the wireless, already busy with breakfast. A breakfast which Percy could eat, armed with a proper dosage. Eat, and enjoy. He was endlessly appreciative of his new position, and the increased salary that came with it. It would be tight making ends meet, but in a few months Percy expected to be able to move out. He could rent a room somewhere in Diagon Alley. He knew Oliver had a flat there, with one of his new teammates from Puddlemere, and he made less as a reserve player than Percy did as a personal assistant. It was manageable.

“Good morning, dear,” his mother said, smiling over her shoulder. “Any plans for today?”

“I might visit Hogsmeade,” Percy said. “I need a new set of robes.”

“Do you?” she said, sounding surprised. “Perhaps I’ll come along! I could use a day out of the house. Oh, there’s Errol with the post. Be a dear and get the window, would you?”

Percy walked to the window, his good mood slightly diminished. He did not want his mother to accompany him, but he could not think of a way to turn her offer down. He couldn’t stop her from going to Hogsmeade. If he told her it was Hogsmeade weekend, it would only embolden her. His siblings would be upset. He doubted he would get a chance to see Harry,

unless Fred and George bodily dragged him before their mother. They would both be so amused by it.

Percy saw that it was not only Errol flying towards the Burrow, but two other owls. One carried their copies of the *Daily Prophet*, and the other had a terribly familiar brown paper package hanging from its claws. Percy had to lean out of the window to stop Errol from crashing into the side of the house. The other two owls landed on the ground. He hastily paid the *Daily Prophet* owl, who flew off with the indignance of one not allowed to steal breakfast, while the Hogwarts owl stared at him. Owlishly. Percy was half tempted to return the bird to sender, but that package was damning evidence. If it contained what he thought it did. And the twins had calculated its arrival for when they knew he was at the Burrow. They didn't know about his visits to Aunt Muriel, otherwise the previous package would have been the same.

"What's going on out there?" his mother asked from behind him.

"Only a pile up, mother," Percy said, awkwardly untying the package and shoving it down the front of his jumper. He seized Errol and carried the old owl to the kitchen table, where he gratefully collapsed. The package started slipping.

"Excuse me," Percy said, abandoning the copies of the *Daily Prophet* next to the unconscious Errol and hurrying to his room. He quickly shoved the package under his mattress and went back downstairs. He hadn't told Harry about the pictures yet, though Percy knew he needed to. He was ashamed at how much time he spent looking at them. And now the twins had sent more.

"What was that about?" his mother asked, trying to untangle a letter from Errol's slack, feathered body.

"Beg pardon?" Percy said, a little breathlessly. He took a copy of the *Daily Prophet* and opened it at random. He glanced at his mother, who was watching him with a conspiratorial smile.

"Sending letters to Penelope again, are you?" she said, overjoyed by the prospect.

Percy looked back at his paper. He had opened it to the Opinion section, and a piece entitled *Why Can't Goblins Be More Like House-elves?* He turned the page, hoping to start his day with something a little less awful. No doubt Harry would have a considerable amount to say about such a facially offensive piece.

"That's wonderful, Percy!" his mother said, taking a seat across from him. "Will you be going to one of those muggle plays again?"

Percy could feel himself starting to blush. "No, mother. I am no longer acquainted with Penelope."

"Oh, is it someone else then?" his mother said excitedly. "What's her name?"

The kitchen fire crackled loudly and flared green. To Percy's astonishment, Mr. Crouch's head appeared.

"Molly is that you?" Mr. Crouch said.

"Barty?" his mother said, hurrying over. "What's the matter?"

Percy partially stood, thrown by his mother referring to his boss as *Barty*. It was strange enough when his father did it.

"Is your son there?" Mr. Crouch asked.

"I'm here, sir," Percy said, joining his mother by the fire.

"We've got a situation on our hands," Mr. Crouch said, green flames flickering around his head. He glanced at Percy's mother. "Would you be able to fetch Arthur? I need his expertise on this."

"Yes, of course," Percy's mother said. Percy watched her leave the kitchen, then turned back to Mr. Crouch.

"What's the matter, sir?" he asked.

"A shipment of flying carpets was intercepted," Mr. Crouch said in a low voice. "Spotted off the coast, flying them in. It seems Bashir has turned to smuggling. We've got the smugglers in custody, and have seized their cargo. This could blow up in all of our faces if Amelia handles it poorly."

Percy could already hear his father running down the stairs, coming to help clean up the mess he made. He nodded firmly, his plans for the day forgotten. He hadn't even got to enjoy breakfast.

Harry stared longingly through the bay windows of Gladrags, remaining perfectly still as a tailor flitted about him. Pins, measuring tapes, swatches of cloth flew around him in a tornado. He was trapped, and Jasmine and Phoebe looked malevolently pleased by it.

His other friends had left him in their clutches, choosing instead to gallivant through the winter wonderland of Hogsmeade.

"I was going to wear a suit," Harry protested. No one listened. The instructions had been to wear dress robes, and his friends had pooled their spending money together to buy him dress robes *befitting a champion*. Soon, he was draped in layers of fabric. Jasmine and Phoebe both stared at him for a moment, then fell about.

"You look like a dementor!"

“Merlin, he does look like Professor Snape!”

“Thanks,” Harry said drily, unsettled by the comparison.

Phoebe clutched her stomach, Felipe slipping out of her hand and trying to make a break for it. He hopped right into the glass door and slid down. Once she had recovered from her fit of laughter, Phoebe retrieved him.

“He refuses to wear anything but black,” Jasmine said apologetically to the tailor. “So we’ll need to make the cut interesting. Maybe something more fitted...”

“Harry loves sweeping through the corridors,” Phoebe said. “So it needs to billow. We could do something with the lining...”

Harry bore this gracefully, having no opinion on dress robes. He had fully intended on wearing a suit, the same one he’d worn to the Quidditch World Cup. This bold stand for muggleborns had been rejected, as the Yule Ball was too formal for it. Apparently. And as a prefect, and hopeful Head Boy, Harry knew he needed to look the part. At least some of the time.

What felt like hours later, Harry was released from his suffering. Jasmine and Phoebe went off to do their own holiday shopping. He and Astrid had agreed to meet at the Three Broomsticks, so Harry made his way to the busy pub. He wished he had got to look around Gladrags a bit, though most of their ware was far out of his price range. Their ready-to-wear clothes were all charmed. Cooling and heating charms, shirts that could make a stomach appear larger or smaller, undergarments that shouted when they grew too dirty. Clothing that strobed through different colors, patterns that flashed like blinking fairy lights. They had an impressive selection of socks.

Harry shook off the snow that had collected on his head, then stepped into the Three Broomsticks. The inside of the pub was toasty, smelling strongly of roasting meat and butterbeer, and packed to the gills. Harry paused by the door, looking around for Astrid. He located her not-quite-as-bald head near one of the fireplaces. She was too busy glaring at a table of laughing Gryffindors to notice him.

As Harry waded through the tables, he spotted Monty surrounded by all of his friends. Harry was still on the fence about Hermione and Ron, though he thought both could be good friends to his brother. He wasn’t one to manage his brother’s friendships. He had hoped being friends with someone studious would help motivate Monty. Hermione’s dedication to academics was a good contrast to Ron’s indifference. They balanced each other out. However, based on what Monty had told him in the early hours of the morning, Ron was on thin ice.

What was more troublesome was Mafalda’s mini-spy behavior. Harry had been leaving little clues for her to pick up for months, to keep the girl entertained. Lucky for her, most people did not pay attention to what the first-years got up to, so long as they weren’t being too annoying. Harry would be more worried about her if she didn’t have any friends, but she got along well enough with the other Slytherin first-years, and Dennis Creevey. He had been hoping Mafalda would worm her way onto the gobstones team, if only so she got to know Derek Wilkes. Their situations were uncannily similar, as they were to other children of

muggles and squibs. Resented for their magic, shunned from their families, difficulty adjusting to the magical world, to magic even existing, dealing with prejudice for their blood status. It was a lot for an eleven year old to go through. Mafalda was more fortunate than most, as the Weasleys had taken her in.

It was still weird for her to be giving pictures of him to Fred and George. Harry could only guess what those two were doing with them. He had got the camera off Mafalda and put an end to it. He would deal with Fred and George later.

It wasn't until Harry sat at her table that Astrid noticed him.

"You see that?" Astrid said, nodding to one corner. Harry surreptitiously looked over, and spotted Hagrid talking to Rita Skeeter of all people. Her cameraman, the mononymic Bozo, was nursing a pint as they chatted.

"Fuck me," Harry said. "He really is an idiot."

"He's drunk more than those bloody big abraxan," Astrid muttered. Astrid passed a bottle of butterbeer to him, and Harry was pleased to find it was warm. "Look, they're leaving now."

"He's going to break Madame Maxime's heart," Harry said, watching as Hagrid parted the entire pub to get to the door, Skeeter and her photographer following close behind. "You can swoop in and pick up the pieces."

Astrid scowled at him, taking a swig from her own bottle. "Wasn't going to ask her. She's ancient."

"I've told you, I don't mind if you want to go with someone else," Harry said, looking around the Three Broomsticks. He spotted the loud table of Gryffindors straight away. Fred, George, Lee, Angelina, Alicia, and Katie. Almost the entire quidditch team. McClaggen was likely headfirst in a bog somewhere.

"It's not Johnson," Harry said quietly. "She's not a good enough chaser. That leaves Spinnet and Bell."

Harry looked between the two other chasers. Katie Bell was average height, lightly built like most quidditch players. Harry hadn't interacted with her much. Alicia Spinnet, however, was tall and broad shouldered, with a deep tan and a handsome face. She was the foundation for many of the Gryffindor team's most effective plays. Harry knew her mainly as a fellow prefect, and she had always been friendly enough.

"Alicia Spinnet?" Harry whispered, sliding closer to Astrid. He was astonished to see her blush, though she looked furious about it.

"It's stupid," Astrid muttered. "The whole quidditch rivalry thing. She probably doesn't even fancy girls."

"She's a really good chaser," Harry said.

"I know," Astrid said, dropping her head.

Harry glanced at the Gryffindor table again, and saw they were all getting up to leave.

“You should ask her,” Harry said, kicking Astrid lightly. “She won’t be mean about it if she’s not interested.”

Astrid sat back up, holding onto her butterbeer for dear life. “You’re right. What kind of captain am I?” She looked at him, determination now blazing in her eyes. The change was alarming, but Harry was happy to see it. “What about you? I thought you needed someone to go with.”

Harry shrugged, taking another sip from his butterbeer. He was glad for how crowded the Three Broomsticks was, as the Gryffindors were having a time of it getting out. “I’ve got a plan. You go on, I need to pick up a few things.”

Astrid killed her bottle then leapt up. Harry watched her bull towards Alicia, catching the taller girl’s sleeve just before she followed her teammates into the snow. Alicia looked annoyed at first, and ready to snap Astrid in half, but as Astrid spoke her expression became slightly embarrassed, and what Harry hoped was flattered. He kept drinking his butterbeer, watching as the two girls left the pub together.

Harry sighed. At least one of them got to go to the Yule Ball with who they wanted to. Harry leaned back, taking time to finish his butterbeer, enjoying how warm it made him feel. A headache had been forming all day. Too many sleepless nights. Everything was too bright, too loud. His eyes felt gritty. The butterbeer helped dim it all down. Harry couldn’t think of a muggle drink that was equivalent, though someone might have made a butterscotch-flavored beer. It wasn’t farfetched.

When he was finished, Harry pocketed the cork from his butterbeer then strolled out of the Three Broomsticks. It was less comfortable without Astrid there. He could focus on her and not the people staring at him, whispering, debating whether to ask him to the Yule Ball. Harry was surprised so many girls had approached him, including Fleur Delacour for whatever mad reason. Some seemed to think him dating Cedric had been a one-off, a fluke, and not a larger sign that he liked other boys. Well, one in particular. Who may have been being harassed by a certain pair of twins.

Harry left the Three Broomsticks behind, striding through Hogsmeade towards Zonko’s Joke Shop. He could see Fred and George through the frosty windows, their two empty red heads. He took his wand, silencing the doorbell before it gave him away. Lee Jordan was on the other side of the store with Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, comparing Screaming Yo-Yos. Pleased the three were noisily distracted, Harry silently approached Fred and George.

“Hello,” he said from behind them.

The twins jumped, dropping the rubber animals they held. The haddock gave a sad wheeze. A stoat bounced towards Harry and stopped at his feet.

“What do you want, Evans?” Fred asked warily.

Harry stepped on the rubber stoat, making it squeak. He smirked at Fred, then turned to George. George looked back at him, swallowing nervously.

“Did Percy tell you about the pictures?” George asked, looking around Zonko's for help.

“I will address that later,” Harry said, smiling slightly. George took a step back, knocking over a display of rubber chickens. “You two,” he said, still watching George, “owe me a favor.”

Chapter End Notes

To any cloak theorists rereading, I added a few lines to the Lupin/Harry scene. I have been so confused by the comments lol

I try not to let any comments influence my writing unless it's like a typo. Sometimes I'll see something and I'll be like, hold up, I'm about to address that in the next few chapters, but I don't want to say anything to spoil it. Even saying that feels spoilery. Damned if you do :(

Bite the Biscuit

Chapter Summary

December 1994

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The flying carpets were exquisite.

Persian rugs had once been the go-to in Britain, after the collapse of the domestic market. The British designers had been heavily influenced by the Turkish aesthetic, geometric motifs dominated by reds and golds. Mr. Crouch had admitted to his grandfather having owned an Axminster, a timeless piece no doubt collecting dust somewhere. Persian rugs had been prized for their durability, using a different technique to create more rounded shapes, florals and medallions, people and animals, tendrils and arabesques.

The Moroccan rugs told a story. Without the uniformity, the rigidity of other styles, the weavers were free to incorporate more abstract symbols in a kaleidoscope of colors. No two were the same, nor woven for the same purpose. Some had large, repeating patterns of diamonds. Others depicted a sequence of events, from birth to death. Still others were portraits of cavorting creatures, in vibrant, eccentric colors. Walking through the consignment of rugs the Ministry had confiscated, Percy felt like he was in an art gallery.

“What the hell are we going to do with all of these?” Mr. Jordan asked, reaching out to tug at the rainbow fringe of one rug. The threads twitched hopefully, but subsided.

“Destroy them,” Mr. Crouch said bluntly.

Percy’s jaw dropped.

A spare office in their department had been hastily cleared out to hold the flying carpets they had seized. There were dozens, which had been ambitious of Mr. Bashir. He had not personally been smuggling, but the pair they had caught readily confessed as to who had sent them. There was still a question of who to fine for possession and transportation of the rugs. The smugglers had been flying in on a flying carpet, nearly twelve feet long. Not exactly inconspicuous. Percy’s father was still attempting to interpret his own law.

Percy cleared his throat. “Should we not return the flying carpets to their rightful owners?”

“And let them have another attempt?” Mr. Crouch said, frowning at a rug that tried to unroll itself. “I think not. Smugglers are like roaches. They’ll keep coming back unless you completely eradicate them.”

Mr. Jordan sighed. "It's just flying carpets, Barty. The embargo's only been in place a few months. Let's give them a slap on the wrist and be done with it."

Mr. Crouch's lips thinned.

"And it's Christmas soon," Mr. Jordan pointed out. "I think we'd all like to go home."

Mr. Crouch's lips vanished. Mr. Jordan grimaced, then turned away to examine another rug.

"Thank you for the reminder," Mr. Crouch said. "It does bring to mind another matter. Weasley, you are aware the Yule Ball is being hosted at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, sir," Percy said. Destroy the rugs? Even ignoring how fascinating they were, they were incredibly valuable. Tens of thousands of galleons. It would be a huge loss.

"Due to a prior engagement, I am unable to attend," Mr. Crouch said, glaring at a rug until it stopped trying to unroll. "You will be going in my stead. Ludo will also be in attendance, so coordinate with him."

"Very good, sir," Percy said, his thoughts now occupied by a new worry. He had not expected to attend the Yule Ball. Harry was going to be at the Yule Ball. Harry was going to open the ball. He was going to have a dance partner. Someone who was not Percy.

He needed new robes.

"Let's put a pin in this," Mr. Jordan said, gesturing to the dozens of flying carpets the Ministry was now in possession of. "It'll keep until the new year. And unless you plan on sending our smugglers to Azkaban, let's have Arthur issue them a fine and send them on their way."

Percy glanced at a smaller rug, one sized for a single person. An older woman, for example, who could no longer sit comfortably on a broom, who couldn't apparate as well as when she was younger, who could trip and hurt herself getting out of a floo. The flying carpets were safer, and more comfortable. Percy doubted his father had been thinking about Aunt Muriel, or anything at all, really, when he decided to enact an embargo. He had seen one muggle rug with a flying enchantment and signed the death warrant for an entire industry.

Percy followed his superiors out of the temporary flying carpet storage. The door was shut on the matter.

"We can't revoke the embargo," Mr. Jordan said as they walked to the lifts. He and Mr. Crouch were on the way to release the smugglers after their weekend in a holding cell. Percy needed to track down Ludo Bagman. "It'll look like we're giving in to what Bashir wants."

Percy nodded, not feeling able to respond. He could have spoken at length in support of the embargo, and more broadly in support of the Ministry, but none of them were pleased with the law now that the time for enforcement had come. If flying carpets were removed from the Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects in response to the incident, it would look like

blatant capitulation. Another embarrassment for the Ministry, and for Percy's father specifically. It would make them look weak.

He wished his father had never written that bloody law.

As Mr. Crouch and Mr. Jordan caught a lift up to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Percy waited for one to take him down to Magical Games and Sports. The Yule Ball. He had hoped Mr. Crouch might invite him, but had never suspected he would be there as the sole representative of their department. Percy got onto the lift. The Yule Ball. There would be a dinner, he could get through that. He'd be able to eat a normal amount, and wouldn't stand out for picking at or outright ignoring his food. He would be expected to dance.

He would have to dance with a woman.

What would Harry think about that?

Who was Harry taking to the Yule Ball?

Percy got off on the seventh floor, his stomach twisting unpleasantly. It was only one night, only four hours he had to get through. It would be fine.

Ludo Bagman was in his office, a rare sight as the man spent as little time in it as he could pull off. He was prone to roaming the Ministry, when he bothered being in the building at all. Percy knocked on his open door, and was loudly welcomed in.

"Ah, Percy, is it?" Bagman said, reclining in his plush chair. His office was the polar opposite of Mr. Crouch's ascetic industry. The walls were hidden behind pictures of quidditch games through the ages, predominantly Mr. Bagman's games, from his days as a Hufflepuff beater, to his years on the Wimbourne Wasps, and finally the pinnacle of his career on the English national team. He had been an exceptional player. His old Wimbourne Wasps robes were displayed on a mannequin in one corner. Everything was yellow and black. It was a *fun* office. He was a *fun* department head.

"Good afternoon, sir," Percy said, glancing at Mr. Bagman's desk to see what he was working on, if anything at all. There was a half-empty bottle of fire whiskey, an envelope with the Gringotts' seal, and, to Percy's consternation, a letter on cheaper parchment, in handwriting he recognized.

"Did Barty send you down?" Mr. Bagman asked, crossing his arms behind his head. "I've already told him, flying carpet quidditch is too niche for Britain. Imagine trying to catch a snitch on one of those things! They simply haven't got the speed."

"This is regarding the Yule Ball," Percy said, tearing his eyes away from the letter Fred and George had sent. "I will be attending, as Mr. Crouch has a prior engagement."

"Ah, that," Mr. Bagman said, his expression falling. "His wife passed around this time of year. His son too, come to think of it. Rotten luck."

Percy was taken aback, both by the information and it being described as *rotten luck*. He was already on edge, between the flying carpets and having to attend an event where someone else would be in Harry's arms.

"Since we are going to Hogwarts," Percy said, glancing at the letter from the twins, "it would be a good opportunity for you to pay my brothers."

Mr. Bagman's expression froze. "Beg pardon?"

"My brothers," Percy repeated. "Fred and George Weasley. Identical twins. They placed a bet with you at the Quidditch World Cup. Thirty-seven galleons, fifteen sickles, three knuts."

"You *do* have a good memory," Mr. Bagman muttered. He cleared his throat. "They're a bit young to be gambling."

"Nevertheless, you accepted their bet," Percy said, meeting Mr. Bagman's eyes. "I believe you said you would give them *excellent odds*. What, precisely, were those odds?"

He watched indifferently as sweat began accumulating on Mr. Bagman's forehead.

"I, ah, can't recall off the top of my head, lad," Mr. Bagman said. He sat upright, looking far less comfortable.

Percy frowned. "I would prefer to settle this matter between us, but perhaps a third party would be an aid to your memory. I could bring my father into this, or we could put this matter before the Wizengamot." He looked at the letter from Gringotts, his suspicion growing. "Perhaps the goblins would intercede."

"Now, let's not be hasty," Mr. Bagman said quickly. "There's no need for all that!"

"What were the odds, Mr. Bagman?" Percy asked evenly.

Mr. Bagman began chuckling, though he looked ready to be sick. "Around two hundred to one."

Percy stared at him, his blood running cold. He firmly reminded himself that this buffoon was the head of a department. Two hundred to one on a bet with teenagers, on one team getting the snitch but the other winning. It wasn't such a rarity in quidditch to warrant odds like that. It even happened in school games. It was mad.

Percy closed his eyes. Two hundred to one. Seventy-four hundred galleons, three thousand sickles, six hundred knuts. Over seventy-five hundred galleons. It was a staggering amount of money. Money that Mr. Bagman clearly didn't have, if he was getting letters from Gringotts.

He looked at Mr. Bagman again, disgusted by the man. "Can you at least repay their initial investment? And the five galleons for their trick wand."

Mr. Bagman sagged with relief, and began smiling again. "Of course. Absolutely. No problem whatsoever!"

Percy nodded, then left Mr. Bagman to sweat over his desperate financial situation. He was poised to embroil the Ministry in yet *another* scandal. Despairing of the state of things, Percy quickly walked back to the lifts. He would only concern himself with his personal grievance. Defrauding his brothers was crossing a line. Percy didn't care how Mr. Bagman came up with the money. If it came down to it, Mr. Bagman had plenty of rubbish in his office he could sell.

Monty's set of chessmen were not a match for Ron's grizzled pieces. Monty didn't play chess that often, and his chessmen lacked the experience of the set Ron had inherited. They also didn't trust Monty, and frequently shouted conflicting advice which only served to confuse him. Ron had been playing with his chessmen for years, and was brilliant at chess besides. He had little issue getting his pieces to move where he wanted them to go.

Hermione was sitting nearby, occasionally looking up from her book to sigh over Monty's latest move. Neville had wisely chosen gobstones as his game of preference. It honestly looked more fun to Monty, at least the way Harry played it. But Neville was down at the greenhouses, helping Professor Sprout check the winterization of the more sensitive plants.

As one of Ron's pawns tore the head off a bishop, Hermione snapped her book shut.

"Isn't there something more productive you could be doing?" she asked.

"Like what?" Ron asked, smirking as Monty's remaining bishop mourned the loss of his compatriot.

"Oh, I don't know," Hermione said. "What about the egg?"

Monty glanced at her, unable to bear the gloating of the pawn. "I've told you, it's under control."

"It's already been a month!" she exclaimed. "Who knows how long it will take to work out the clue! All we know is that it's something to do with the lake, and only because of Mafalda."

Hermione said this last part with a hint of resentment. Monty got the impression she didn't like Mafalda very much. Maybe because she knew about the lake before Hermione did?

"Leave it, Hermione," Ron said, his eyes roaming the chessboard. Monty suspected he had the rest of the game already planned out in his head. He sometimes wished Ron had that kind of foresight in other situations. "It's not like Monty wanted to be in this tournament in the first place." He glanced up at Monty, smiling slightly.

Monty smiled back, glad Ron had finally come around to that fairly obvious fact. Hermione, however, was growing increasingly distressed.

“Alright,” Monty said, taking out his wand. He wasn’t quite up to Harry’s wordless spellcasting, but he had picked up a thing or two. He whispered, “*Muffliato*.”

“What’s that?” Hermione demanded. “What spell was that?”

“Just a silencing charm,” Monty said, putting his wand away. “Since you keep asking, I’ve already worked out the clue.”

Hermione’s eyebrows shot up. “When did that happen? Why didn’t you tell us?”

Monty rubbed the back of his neck. He knew why he hadn’t. He had been upset with both Hermione and Ron, and it was one thing after the other. His name coming out of the Goblet of Fire, Ron shutting him out, Hermione trying to mediate when neither of them wanted her to, the house-elves, and now the Yule Ball. His tiff with Ron over how he had talked about Luna, Neville, and Hermione hadn’t lasted long. Monty didn’t want to leave Ron in a lurch, as the only person without a date, so they’d asked around the common room and found Parvati was free. Ron had been oddly fixated on who Hermione was going with, and Monty was beginning to suspect it was more than idle curiosity on Ron’s part.

“Well, what is it?” Ron asked, leaning over the chessboard and eliciting shouts from all the pieces.

“I’ve got to get something out of the Black Lake,” Monty said. He looked at Hermione. He could practically see the cogs whirring in her head. “And I’ve already got a plan for how to do it. So really, Hermione, there’s nothing to worry about.”

His words didn’t have an impact. Hermione looked very worried. “The lake’s dangerous, Monty. Not even the professors know everything that’s in there.”

He noticed the book she had been reading was the one Mafalda had brought over, about freshwater creatures. Many of them were creatures they learned about in Defense, and in Care. Did Professor Grubbly-Plank know about the Second Task? They’d spent almost every class down at the Black Lake.

“Like I said, I’ve got a plan,” Monty said.

“Have a little faith, Hermione,” Ron said. “Monty’s one of the best students, yeah?”

Monty smiled faintly, worried that would become yet another issue between him and Ron. But Ron said it without rancor. Monty had gradually come to understand Hermione’s frustration with others not being on her same level, having her same passion for learning. It was like trying to walk down the street with someone, but they kept falling behind. So you’d stop and wait for them, but you had an appointment and every time you waited for them to catch up you were later and later.

No one was walking at Hermione’s speed.

Ron wasn’t stupid, but being stuck in class for hours, then sitting in the library for hours, wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea. He didn’t have quidditch as an outlet, like Monty had. He

didn't even come down to the practices, or get a chance to fly much at all. It was another thing between them that Monty had no idea how to resolve. He had been hoping Ron would get on the team. He'd even imagined Ron being the captain one day, given how good he was at strategizing.

"Hey," he said, getting Ron's attention. "Why don't you talk to Angelina about being a reserve keeper?"

Ron gave him a startled look, then began to turn red. "What's the use? I already screwed up at the tryouts."

"So?" Monty said. "I've seen you do loads better. It was a bad day."

Ron sighed, looking back at their game. "Maybe. Are you going to make another move, or do you forfeit?"

Monty looked at his remaining pieces, already knowing he was going to lose. He would ask Angelina himself. It was stupid they didn't have a reserve team. "Queen to rook eight."

Ron smiled.

There was a single custard cream on Harry's plate. Astrid leaned over to frown at it. Given it was dinner time, it was an odd addition to the table.

"Don't eat it," she said.

"No shit," Harry said, picking up the biscuit. It was a sandwich biscuit, two pieces of thin shortbread with cream in the middle. Unlike the muggle ones he'd had in the past, this custard cream was not stamped with the words *CUSTARD CREAM*. It was, at a glance, indistinguishable from similar biscuits. However, this one helpfully had the words *CANARY CREAM* baked into it.

"Why do you look like you're going to eat it?" Astrid asked. "Haz, it's a trap. It's not even a dinner food."

Harry didn't respond, still examining the custard cream. He knew what it was, and he suspected where it was from. Canaries had been popping up left and right since the holiday started. It was only a matter of time. He glanced down the table and saw Mafalda watching. Harry would have wondered how she pulled it off, if he didn't know Fred and George regularly went to the kitchens.

He looked at Astrid again, who was muttering something about sabotage. Harry rolled his eyes. She had been doing better since Alicia had accepted her invitation to the Yule Ball. Even though they hadn't talked about it, Harry knew Astrid had been on edge since the Quidditch World Cup. She had been there with her family. With her little sister. What they

had all been promised was over, the reign of the Dark Lord, was very clearly not. Celebrations had turned into a hellish nightmare. And she was in Slytherin. Parents of their housemates had been in that crowd, putting her baby sister's life at risk. People who were on the quidditch team. People Astrid lived with, ate with, studied with, played with, for years. It was amazing she hadn't gone further off the deep end. That didn't even address fancying a girl in a rival house, who was on a team with a boy Astrid viewed as stealing Harry's spotlight. Overshadowing the Slytherin muggleborn. For all she pretended to ignore current events, Astrid knew which way the wind blew.

"Harry, put the biscuit down," Terence said, watching him uneasily.

"Why is he making that face?" Phoebe whispered.

"He's fucked in the head," Adrian said, glancing at Jasmine. She rolled her eyes, but was smiling.

"We all are," Cassius said, looking at the biscuit Harry held. "Are you going to eat it or not?"

Harry took a bite.

Chapter End Notes

I put this in a note on the previous chapter, but for those who missed it, I added a few lines to the Lupin/Harry scene

Also, here's a [song](#) I like

Lily of the Valley

Chapter Summary

Christmas day, 1994

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Presents!”

Monty woke up with a start, his heart pounding. But it was just Ron, excited about Christmas. Monty closed his eyes again, breathing slowly until his heart returned to its normal rhythm.

Seeing presents at the foot of his bed was as novel as it had been the first time. Monty still expected to receive nothing. If the people around him hadn't been talking about it, he might have forgotten Christmas completely. He reached for his glasses, his fingers knocking into Hester's empty cage. She was in his trunk, too cold and tired to move during the winter. Occamies weren't native to Britain, and the weather was too extreme for her to tolerate. She still grumbled from time to time, but she wasn't interested in eating at all.

Shoving his glasses on, Monty smiled at seeing so many brightly wrapped presents waiting for him to open them. He started with the smallest, which turned out to be a tissue from the Dursleys. He set it aside to wipe his arse with later. He got a new sweater from Mrs. Weasley, featuring a Swedish Short-Snout. Ron complained about getting maroon again; Monty ignored the way it made him feel. Ron could complain about his mum if he liked. He had other presents to open. A book about quidditch from Hermione, a sack of dungbombs from Ron. He doubted McGonagall would like it if he set any off, and it would be a mark against him. He *could* use them to bribe Peeves.

From Sirius and Remus he got a quidditch board game. Monty marveled at it for a long time, ignoring Ron's exclamations. He knew about wizard's chess and gobstones. It only made sense there were other magical board games. It was a two player game, complete with miniature brooms and quidditch balls, and rather onerous instructions. Quidditch *did* have a lot of rules. He could even use it to recreate games. It was brilliant.

Luna had drawn him a picture of Hester in flight. Monty could not recall her ever actually seeing Hester in flight, but the resemblance was uncanny. The colors shimmered off the paper. He could only imagine how much time Luna had spent on it. He hoped she liked the set of chalks he had sent her. She could use them for drawing, and for runes, which were actually a sort of drawing now that he thought about it.

The last present, unmarked, Monty knew was from Harry. Curious, Monty picked up the parchment-wrapped gift. He glanced up at the other boys in his dormitory, but they were

preoccupied with their own presents. He carefully unfolded the parchment, revealing what looked like a sheath, but for a wand. It was made of a dark red leather, dragonhide, and had buckled straps long enough to go around his thigh. Monty had never seen anything like it. On the parchment itself was a short message.

For the lake

Severus looked blearily at the foot of his bed, wondering who the hell put the house-elves up to delivering to his private quarters. A double box of pears gave the game away, as did the card containing another threat to not wear his everyday robes to the ball. What was he meant to do with ten pounds of pears?

He turned to the other gift awaiting him. He cautiously picked up the present, wrapped in his son's signature parchment. He, perhaps, should have been less surprised to find a set of solid gold potions knives.

It was a quiet Christmas morning at the Burrow. Aunt Muriel had refused to come, even though the twins were safely away at Hogwarts. It was only Percy, his mother, and his father.

Perhaps it was spiteful of him, but Percy had given his mother a book entitled *Cooking the Muggle Way*. His father had received a book on economics, *Preferential Policies: An International Perspective*. The muggle employee at the book shop said it was popular among students. Percy hoped the novelty of it being written by a muggle, an American no less, would encourage his father to read it.

His own gifts were equally subtle. The twins had been surprisingly thoughtful and sent a box of muggle custard creams; it seemed their wellspring of Slytherin photographs had dried up. Most surprising, though, was the gift from his parents and older brothers.

"You've been busy all week," his mother said, holding the book he had given her anxiously. "And we know you want to look your best."

Percy looked down at the set of dress robes he had received. Midnight blue, embroidered along the hems with thread-of-silver. He suspected his mother had added the detailing, though she rarely embroidered. It was a time consuming endeavor.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "Thank you."

“You’ve got another gift, Percy,” his father said, passing him a parchment-wrapped package. He fought to keep his blush down as he accepted it. Carefully, knowing his parents were watching, Percy unfolded the parchment. Inside was a single book. *Dark Arts: A Legal Companion*.

Percy stared at it. He had mentioned it only in passing over a year prior. He never had found an adequate copy. Percy put his face in his hands, feeling overwhelmed.

“What is it?” his mother asked worriedly.

Percy shook his head.

“Let’s see,” his father said, gently pulling the book away from him. “Goodness. This is nothing to sneeze at!”

“What is it?” his mother asked.

“I think it’s one of the self-updating books,” his dad said, handing it back to Percy. “Someone must think highly of you, son.”

Percy knew he was blushing. He had lost all control of the situation.

“Oh, who is it from?” his mother asked eagerly.

He sat back up, looking at the parchment it had come wrapped in. Harry had only written a few words.

Protean charms and misuse of muggle artifacts

“Auntie Muriel,” Percy replied. Protean charms? Muggle artifacts? What sort of muggle artifacts would a Protean charm be useful on? “We correspond occasionally.”

Percy picked up the book, tracing the cover. It was not a new edition, but well used. How long had it taken Harry to find such a thing? He let his parents’ conversation wash over him, thinking about a gift hidden in his room. Whether it was good enough.

Harry drew his knees up, looking at the small pile on his bed. His friends had all pitched in for his dress robes, but had still got him some sweets, with a heavy emphasis on gum. There were three other presents; he smiled ruefully at the absence of a gift from Mrs. Weasley. He knew why. George needed little encouragement to spill his guts. He was very informative.

From Luna, he had received a drawing of a babelfish. Of *his* babelfish, Frankie. She was moving in circles, with the same silly expression she had, eyes bulging, mouth gaping as she fed off his thoughts.

Harry was blown away by Monty's gift. He had sent Harry his model of a Swedish Short-Snout. She sneezed, cool blue flames shooting out of her short snout. Monty had also sent toffee apples, a doubly forbidden fruit. Harry's braces would not have survived such an ordeal.

From his dad, Harry received new pairs of shoes. Harry had been transfiguring his larger for weeks. New dragonhide boots, more supple dragonhide shoes that were better for skateboarding, and a pair of muggle skate shoes. He was rich in shoes, and hoped his dad wasn't too upset about getting more potions tools.

He had only received a card from Percy. A beautiful card, depicting a night scene with snow falling quietly over a forest. The paper was thick, and the branches of the trees shook gently when he touched the card. Harry knew he would keep it for the rest of his life.

Dear Harry,

I have a gift for you, though it is one I must give you in person. I apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.

This card reminded me of you. Everything does.

Happy Christmas,

Percy

Harry didn't know when he would next see Percy. Perhaps in Hogsmeade, or at the Second Task. He was a patient boy. He could wait.

When the wrapped presents were cleared, and the others were busy with their own gifts, Harry spotted one more thing at the foot of his bed.

A Christmas cracker.

Harry grabbed it, concealing the garishly wrapped cracker in his hand, and went to the bathroom. Once the door was safely shut, Harry took it in both hands and pulled.

There was no smoke, no live animals, no confetti, no explosion. The cracker simply unraveled, and in its wrapping Harry found a hairpin.

Harry stared at the hairpin in his hands. It wasn't a plain piece of metal, like the bobby pins that sometimes fell out of Phoebe's hair, or the clips Adrian used to keep his hair back while flying. Attached to the pin were lilies of the valley. The flowers hung down like tiny bells, softly glowing as if the petals had absorbed moonlight. They felt like real flowers. Harry could even *smell* them, and he was nearly overwhelmed by homesickness. The flowers weren't common in Cokeworth, but they sometimes cropped up in abandoned lots, or found purchase in a sidewalk crack. He would find them in the woods, far outside of town.

Last year a crown. Now it was lilies. Whoever was behind the Christmas crackers knew. They knew everything.

He closed his eyes, leaning against the wall until Terence started pounding on the door for him to finish shitting and get out.

Harry stood atop the snow tower he had constructed, looking down at the giant game of snow gobstones he was playing. On the other end of the massive ring was Killian, who looked miserable to be there.

"Snow gobstones isn't a thing!" came Killian's faint cry.

Harry raised his wand.

"Harry, for fuck's sake!"

A giant snowball rolled across the field, crashing into another giant snowball. They were all made out of snow. There was no way to know whose snow gobstones were whose, and Harry hadn't bothered to charm them different colors. The goal was to clear the field. Last stoner standing.

The giant snowball exploded into dozens of smaller snowballs, raining down on Killian's position. A cheer went up from the few people watching. Most were still inside, enjoying a cozy, lazy Christmas day. Across the grounds was a snowball fight. It was Weasleys and Prewetts against the world. Ginny was showing Mafalda how to charm snowballs. Luna was building a snow sculpture of a crumple-horned snorkack. Monty had transfigured bulky snowpeople, which were slowly advancing on the Weasleys. Harry spotted a contingent of fourth-year Slytherins taking shots at everyone else, led by Tracey. Someone had begun digging a trench. The Black Lake was frozen over, and a few people were out skating on it, cutting whorls into the ice. The Whomping Willow shivered, and Professor Sprout and Neville were busy wrapping it in giant pink scarves.

Astrid had rounded up what quidditch players she could and, taking inspiration from Harry, had begun a game of snow quidditch. The air was filled with snowballs, shrieks, laughter. Durmstrang students milled about the deck of their ice-locked ship, a few trudging out to join the Hogwarts students. The abraxan wore huge quilted blankets, steam rising from the troughs of mulled mead in their paddock. The Beauxbatons carriage looked like an iced cake, and a few students ventured into the snow, better dressed for the weather than when they had first arrived.

Snow came down in soft flakes. Harry turned his face to the sky. It was childish, but he stuck out his tongue to catch a flake. Unfortunately, Killian had made his move, and a deluge of snowballs swamped Harry. Shaking himself off, and coughing out a mouthful of snow, Harry aimed his wand at the laughing Killian. The game was on.

The dress robes were laid out on Harry's bed. He stood above them, trying to recall how exactly they were put on. Adrian was in the bathroom doing something loud that involved a lot of running water and splashing. Cassius already had his robes on, slate grey, very professional. Terence struggled to get a pair of new shoes on, wearing sky blue robes with snitches occasionally flying across the fabric. Not too whimsical. Tasteful.

Harry sighed. There were inner robes and outer robes. He had layers to deal with. He climbed onto his bed, shutting his curtains to get changed.

The inner robes were button up, top to bottom. The robes were black, something Harry would not budge on, though a richer and deeper black than any muggle dye could produce. He began doing the buttons one by one, got frustrated, remembered he could use magic, and grabbed his wand to do up the rest. The inner robes were slimmer than his flowing school robes, or what he threw on for his internship. They had a high collar, going all the way up his neck. Despite being completely covered, it still felt revealing. He kept his trousers on underneath, not up to going full on traditional. Harry brushed his hands down his chest, sighing in relief at the uninterrupted fabric. The outer robes were next, wide sleeved with an open front. While the exterior fabric was pure black, Phoebe had insisted on a silk fabric that shimmered like the night sky for the lining.

Dressed, Harry emerged from his curtains. Lady Madeleine hopped onto his bed, a green ribbon in her mouth. Harry took it, and at a nudge from her he tied it in a bow around her neck.

"Who are you getting dressed up for?" he asked. She only blinked at him.

Adrian ran out of the bathroom wearing only his boxers, his hair in an array of spikes.

"You look like a hedgehog," Cassius said.

"Fuck you," Adrian snapped, his spiky hair wobbling.

“It’s very...bold,” Terence decided.

Adrian looked at Harry.

Harry shrugged. “Looks normal to me.”

Adrian pointed at Terence, opening his mouth to no doubt declare his undying loyalty, but the dormitory door slammed open. Adrian shrieked and dove for his bed, his curtains snapping shut behind him.

“Pussy,” Astrid said, lowering her booted foot. She wore dark pink robes with a motif of jagged teeth along the hem. Wigtown Wanderers. Astrid had also applied a bold slash of red across her eyes.

“Are you going to war?” Harry asked, tugging on his boots.

“Yes,” Astrid said. “She’s a Magpies fan. For now.”

“Okay, Astrid,” Jasmine said, placing a hand on her shoulder. She was dressed like a princess, wearing a dress with a voluminous skirt and embroidered bodice, in a gradient of rosy pink and orange like a sunset. Her hair was up and set with glimmering crystals, earrings like drops of sunlight hanging from her ears. She looked at Adrian’s bed, rolled her eyes, then approached Harry. Phoebe trailed behind, wearing a purple sheath dress, the skirt decorated with sparkling gold zig zags. Her dark hair was twisted up and gleaming.

Harry looked at them nervously.

Jasmine crossed her arms. “It’s good to see you didn’t need help getting dressed.”

Phoebe pointed an accusing finger at him. “Your hair!”

“Cut it off,” Astrid said, showing off her own lack of hair.

“I actually have something for it,” Harry said. He searched his pockets, finding the hairpin. Jasmine gasped when she saw it.

Harry hadn’t been sure what to do with the hairpin. It was pretty. Delicate. It reminded him strongly of his mother, in a horrible, aching way. Her name was Lily. His dad would think he was an idiot. Harry knew he was being one.

He swept the side of his hair back, and slid the hairpin in. The rest fell across his face. He looked at the girls.

“How’s that?” Harry asked, feeling strangely vulnerable.

Phoebe started crying.

The dungeons were not as decorated as the rest of Hogwarts, but the people flowing out of the Slytherin common room were festive enough. Almost everyone had leapt at the opportunity to wear something other than their black school robes. Adrian, his hair despiked, wore rich purple robes which complimented Jasmine's sunset dress. Pansy Parkinson looked like a confection in pale pink, while Draco grumbled over someone charming his velvet robes to a dark green. Vincent was in a lighter shade of green, more earthy, accompanied by Tracey in phosphorescent orange. Harry suspected the color was harvested from actual gobstones. Greg was also in moss green, dwarfing Mafalda who trotted next to him in daffodil yellow.

Harry did a double take, then searched the crowd for Killian to come get his charge. His vice-captain was too well hidden.

Harry doubted Mafalda was the only first-year going. Greg had the attitude of someone forced to look after a younger cousin, begrudgingly accepting his fate. Harry decided to leave it to the professors to deal with.

The entrance hall evoked more of a holiday spirit than the dungeons. Icicles charmed to never melt hung from banisters. A trio of suits of armor were trying, and failing, to harmonize. A rose garden had sprung up on the grounds, fairies lounging among the blossoms. The perfume was heady.

Harry found his brother right away, wearing tasteful robes in green a shade darker than his eyes. Next to him was Luna, shining in robes of silver and wearing a necklace of butterbeer corks. Harry had charmed one to sing all the lullabies he knew, and smiled as Luna reached up to adjust it. There was Viktor in red the color of old blood, standing with Hermione who wore fine robes in robin's-egg blue.

Harry watched them for a moment. Viktor was routinely stalked by fans. Hermione had been mocked for her appearance since starting at Hogwarts. It must have been incredibly flattering to be approached by someone so popular. Someone others wanted. A pureblood.

Harry knew what that was like.

"Champions, over here!" Professor McGonagall called. Astrid, who had been scanning the crowd for her own date, scowled.

"I should've worn tartan," Astrid muttered, finally locating Alicia Spinnet. Alicia had also opted for black robes, though patterned with bold splashes of white like the feathers of a magpie. Near Alicia, wearing ghastly, velvet maroon robes, punctuated with magnificent, moth-eaten lace cuffs and collar, was Georgius Weasley.

Harry approached him, amused by what looked like a very last minute change in wardrobe.

"Who did you exhume for those?" Harry asked, holding out his arm for George to take.

"I switched with Ron," George said, grinning at him. "He's been moaning about his dress robes for ages. Mum bought them secondhand."

“Only second?” Harry asked, leading George towards Professor McGonagall. “It’s very traditional, if the tradition was several centuries ago.”

“I knew you’d love it,” George said, winking at Professor McGonagall, who was indeed striking in forest green and rust red tartan. The wreath of thistles around her hat—also tartan—was a nice touch. She looked at the two of them, sighed, then turned away to usher students into the Great Hall.

They watched Ron pass by in robes that were much too short for him, but were a solid cobalt. He pointedly ignored Hermione, who was too caught up in being with *the* Viktor Krum, or perhaps someone who was civil to her, to notice how much negative attention she was getting. Fleur was with Roger Davies, who was obviously dazed by her presence. She wore robes of satin, the color of a dolphin. It looked dull compared to the reflective silver of Luna’s robes. Monty wasn’t paying much attention to anything, too busy talking to her.

“Alright,” Professor McGonagall said, clapping her hands. “Everyone else is seated. Champions, line up in pairs.”

George jostled Harry’s arm.

“What?” Harry asked, looking at him. “Having second thoughts?”

“Was that an option?” George asked, suddenly looking far less nervous than he had been. In fact, he looked down right chuffed.

Their short line began to move, and Harry led George into the Great Hall. People were clapping. Harry hadn’t much liked being the center of attention during the First Task, but he at least had a dragon to distract him. Now he had a chortling George Weasley.

They approached the top table, and Harry nearly stopped dead.

Sitting there, next to Ludo Bagman, was Percival Septimus Weasley.

“Fuck.”

Fuck it, discord server

<https://discord.gg/bBmc8ZUJ4d>

Promise

Chapter Summary

Yule Ball, 1994

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Looks like your little plan backfired,” George whispered. He hadn’t stopped shaking with laughter since they had walked into the Great Hall.

“Get your shit together, or you’ll be pissing Canary Creams for a week.” Harry whispered back, trying not to move his mouth too much. He painted a smile on as the entire Great Hall continued to applaud, their champions now fully on display.

Harry spotted his dad seated with the other professors. He had also worn black, and to Harry’s astonishment he was wearing a suit. True, his dad had capitulated to wizarding sensibilities and added a grand, flowing cloak over his muggle clothes, but he was still in an all black suit. Double breasted dress coat, a high collar that flared out slightly. He had a cravat. His dad could have stepped out of the pages of an Austen novel. Harry looked at the person seated next to his dad, and a picture began to form.

Charity Burbage was dressed as a cake. Harry was certain her dress was *actually* a cake, as she took a break from clapping to swipe at a swirl of frosting on her skirts. She offered it to his dad, who ignored her, then shrugged and popped her finger in her mouth. Harry was fascinated by their relationship. No one else could get away with pushing so many of his dad’s buttons. However, Harry had no time to dwell on it, not with the world conspiring against him.

Ludo Bagman was among the loudest to cheer, in louder robes of royal purple, emblazoned with big, flashing yellow stars. Karkaroff was terribly free with his emotions; it was clear he was disgusted by a muggleborn girl accompanying his prize pupil. Madame Maxime had no such qualms, clapping politely with everyone else. She was in a lovely gown of lilac silk, the cost of which was, without a doubt, extravagant. Hagrid only had eyes for her.

Percy was devastating in robes of profound midnight, the deep blue a stark contrast to his pale, freckled skin. Harry couldn’t bear to look at him. He would never look away.

They were at a large, round table with the other champions and the judges. Harry had a perfect view.

Instead, his eyes swept the Great Hall. Of the holiday transformations undertaken in the castle, those in the Great Hall were the most pronounced. The long trestle tables were gone,

replaced by dozens of round tables draped in snowy white, lanterns of ice glowing softly in the center of each. The walls had been transfigured to frost, gleaming silver in the lantern light. Long garlands of mistletoe and ivy hung from the ceiling, which boasted a pristine view of the starry night sky. Harry felt as if he sat in the heart of a glacier. He hoped that was not the chill atmosphere exuded by Percy.

The applause died down.

He had to explain himself.

Percy, in his pique, had pulled out a chair and motioned for Monty to sit next to him. Harry had been forced to take a lesser seat several places away.

“Hey, Percy,” Monty said, while Luna held up her gold plate and began reflecting light around the room. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m standing in for Mr. Crouch,” Percy explained. “I’m his personal assistant.”

George leaned in to whisper, “Did you know that?”

“Of course I did,” Harry muttered back.

George frowned, then began fiddling with his lace cuffs. A brightly wrapped toffee fell out of his sleeve.

They both stared at it.

“I forgot that was in there,” George said hastily, snatching it off the table.

“Georgius,” Harry said quietly, still smiling at the crowd. “When I’m Head Boy, I’m going to use you to make all of Filch’s darkest, most perverse dreams come true.”

“What have you been doing at work?” Monty, the best person in the world, asked Percy. “Are you still on cauldron bottoms?”

“I regret to inform you that cauldron bottoms are on the backburner,” Percy said solemnly.

Harry bit his tongue. He needed to clear his mind to get through this. George was staring at him, waiting for him to crack.

“I’ve been putting out fires since the Quidditch World Cup,” Percy continued loftily. Harry turned slightly towards George, wondering what they could even talk about. Canary Creams? “There’s been an uptick in smuggling of late. I’m sure you’ve seen the article in the *Daily Prophet* about Ali Bashir. It’s always a shame when someone so esteemed is caught up in a scandal.”

Harry reached for his goblet, hoping it was filled with something that would help get him through the night.

“Reckon so,” Monty said. “Smuggling what?”

“Flying carpets,” Percy said, shaking his head in regret. “There isn’t a market in Britain for them.”

Harry drank something he couldn’t taste. There wasn’t a market for flying carpets because the Ministry, specifically Mr. Weasley as the unwitting pawn of the broom industry, had contrived for there *not* to be one. Percy had not outright said that, but the subtext was there. He was superb at politicking, saying nothing while saying everything.

“My current project, however, is the International Ban on Dueling,” Percy said neutrally. “My department—”

Harry swooned at *my department*. Percy was so invested in his career, he had taken on responsibility for one of the Ministry’s largest departments.

“—is working to persuade Transylvania to sign. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia, there has been an increase in dueling in the borderlands.”

“Why would you ban dueling?” Monty asked, proving once again that he had no equal.

Harry glanced at Percy, catching the slight fall of his cheek. “Excellent question, Monty.”

“You shouldn’t be ignoring your date,” George whispered.

Harry sighed. He wanted to hear Percy’s lecture on the history of dueling, and the International Confederation of Wizards’ treaty to restrict duels to the death. It was bold of Percy to bring it up with the Supreme Mugwump, Albus Dumbledore, a man who had single-handedly stopped the relentless march of Grindelwald with a duel, at the table. Dumbledore hadn’t killed Grindelwald, though, a fact that had puzzled scholars and the public for decades. Instead, the fallen dark lord was wasting away in Nurmengard. Harry did not know if that was a kindness.

Dumbledore, seemingly oblivious to the conversation regarding an international treaty he had backed, said to his plate, “Pork chops!”

Harry picked up his menu, having been too discomposed by Percy’s presence to care about it. A blanket ban on dueling was preposterous. Harry desperately wanted to talk to Percy about it. He doubted George had an opinion.

“What are you getting?” he asked George.

“Pork chops,” George said, smiling as two grilled pork chops appeared on his plate. “Pork chops. Pork chops.”

Harry watched with mild interest as a tower of pork rose from George’s plate.

“Could I have the lamb stew, please?” he asked his plate. A bowl of stew appeared. “Thank you.”

Harry tuned out the conversations around him, listening as Percy ordered lamb. With mint sauce. Suppressing a groan, Harry picked up his spoon. He dipped it into the stew. The broth

was a rich brown, fragrant with needles of rosemary and sprigs of thyme. The lamb was so tender it fell apart at a touch. The potatoes were golden, soft and starchy. The carrots melted in his mouth. It was the best stew Harry had ever eaten.

He swallowed, needing a distraction from Percy methodically cutting his own lamb. “I know it’s not a potion you use in the Canary Creams,” he said to George and his teetering stack of pork. George had to stand up to get one from the top, lest the whole thing collapse. “Is it a hex?”

“Took me and Fred ages to work it out,” George said, now the proud wielder of, not one, but two pork chops. Harry would have to make sure the other boy washed his hands before the dance.

“It’s a tricky way to cast a hex,” Harry said. “Through food, I mean. I know it activates on contact, but it’s a delayed reaction. Otherwise you’d turn into a canary as soon as you touched it.”

“We know loads about cursed objects,” George said. He took a bite out of a pork chop. “From dad.”

Harry had been remiss in not clarifying his behavioral expectations for George, entertaining as he was. Harry hoped him taking a Gryffindor to the Yule Ball would outweigh *which* Gryffindor on his Head Boy application.

“I’ve been in his garage,” Harry said. George looked at him warily, his cheeks bulging with pork. “I know what he does in there.”

George swallowed. “I know what you and *him* have done in there,” he muttered.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Scratch Canary Creams. You’ll be pissing Pepper Imps for a month.”

“I’m not going to tell anyone,” George said, rolling his eyes. “Nor is Fred. We’re not suicidal.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Harry said. “So, you picked up a thing or two from dear old dad? Reckon your big brother isn’t the only one following in his footsteps. Maybe not in the way your mum would’ve liked. You did hex *muggle* custard creams, right?”

George nodded. “We’ve been trying to use more muggle foods.”

“Why’s that?” Harry asked.

George shrugged. “Not everyone can eat foods made with magic.”

Harry nodded, then turned back to his stew. Percy had told Fred and George about his condition, then. That was surprising. Harry felt slightly more amicable towards the twins, even if their use of muggle foods suggested they fully intended on pranking Percy with one of their hexed biscuits.

“Did you come up with the hex on your own?” Harry asked.

“No,” George said, taking a sip of pumpkin juice. “People have been inventing hexes for ages. Why bother coming up with our own when the work’s already been done?”

“Turning someone into a canary is rather obscure,” Harry mused. “I can’t see it being useful in a fight. Human transfiguration rarely is. Too fickle.”

“Is that what it is?” George asked.

“You can’t be serious,” Harry said. “What did you think it was?”

“A hex?” George ventured.

“*Hex* is a categorization of dark magic,” Harry explained slowly, “based on the degree of the harm inflicted. There are transfiguration and charm hexes. It’s a class of spell, *not* a type of spell.”

“Hm,” George said through another chunk of pork.

“You’re in N.E.W.T. Defense,” Harry said blankly.

George swallowed. “We did well on the practical.”

“Right,” Harry said, feeling disillusioned. The products Fred and George had created were impressive, more so than the potions-based sweets one could purchase at Honeydukes, and not like the gimmicky products at Zonko’s. That Fred and George had been performing human transfiguration unawares via custard creams was preposterous. And yet they had. George seemed to have no idea how extraordinary that was, particularly as they hadn’t been taught any human transfiguration at school yet. They wouldn’t get to it until seventh year.

“Your mum’s really done a number on all of you,” Harry said pensively.

“Eh?”

Harry shook his head and went back to eating his stew.

Percy was watching him.

The tables had been cleared, and the Weird Sisters were setting up their equipment on a stage conjured by the headmaster. So many took such a display of effortless magic for granted, but Harry was always amazed by the power behind the headmaster’s magic, and the strange wand he used.

He could feel the weight of Percy's gaze, heavy, damning shackles pulling him down. Harry dismissed the guilt that accompanied it, focusing instead on the boy in front of him. Harry was taking the lead, his hand as high up George's tense back as possible, the other lightly holding George's sweaty, porky palm.

"I'm prepared to jinx you into dancing," Harry said calmly.

"I can dance," George said, smiling at him. "And I don't mind dancing with a bloke."

"Because it's a laugh?" Harry asked as the Weird Sisters began to play. He guided George gently into a waltz. A completely platonic waltz, with a wide, respectable distance between them.

"A bit," George admitted as they spun lethargically across the floor. "I might get a Howler from mum. But I also don't care who fancies who. It doesn't matter."

"Does Percy know that?" Harry asked.

"Me and Fred have told him as much," George said. "He's a pompous prat, but he's still our brother."

Harry didn't smile, wanting to look as indifferent as possible. Viktor and Hermione were dancing awkwardly nearby, while Fleur herded Roger Davies; she may as well have been dancing with a mannequin. To his surprise, Luna and Monty had also begun a waltz, Monty holding out an arm so Luna could whirl underneath, her silver robes flaring out. Harry had expected something more improvised, with much more flailing, but Monty had a look of intense concentration and Luna was moving in time with the sluggish dirge.

"The holiday before fourth year," George said, drawing Harry's attention, "Percy spent all his time holed up in his room. We all knew he was writing to someone, since Hermes kept coming and going."

"Yeah?" Harry said. His breathing was steady. He was focused on George. Not the people staring at them, gossiping behind their hands. Not the bald amusement on his twin brother's face. Not Percy's cold anger.

"Me and Fred nicked one of the letters," George said with a mischievous grin. "We reckoned he was writing some girl. We were in for a shock."

Harry closed his eyes. "And you call Percy a git."

"We know right from wrong," George said lightly. "We just don't care. Anyway, we kept an eye on him all that year. It was obvious. Always going to the library. Sneaking looks at you. He nearly broke down when you got petrified. He didn't want to go home for Christmas. We thought he was going to have it out with mum about his *prefect duties*."

"Why are you telling me this?" Harry asked quietly.

George shrugged, glancing at something behind Harry. "Percy looks up to dad, and tries to live up to mum's expectations. She's always complaining about how far away Bill and

Charlie live, even in her letters. They've got dangerous jobs, they're in foreign countries. I think Percy's the only one she's really proud of."

Harry sighed. He hated this conversation. "I know he doesn't want to let your mum down."

George grinned at him. "That's the thing, Evans. I think he cares more about *you*."

The song finally ended, and Harry released George. "Thank you."

George swept a bow, his velvet, moldering robes spread wide. "We're square now?"

Harry smiled slightly, taking a handkerchief from a pocket to wipe his hands. "For now."

"Care to trip the light fantastic?"

Severus tore his eyes away from his son. Of all the flowers, the foolish boy had worn lilies in his hair. Severus doubted many would recognize the small, bell-like blossoms as lilies. Not when showy stargazer lilies and tiger lilies existed, cluttering up florists around the world. Others would not associate Lily with a small, highly toxic, woodland flower. Most had not known her well enough.

Charity stood next to him, her bizarre dress keeping others at bay. She held a hand out to him, thankfully one not coated in frosting.

"If I must," Severus said, lightly taking her fingers. "Am I expected to lead?"

"If you want," Charity said, smiling up at him. Severus felt an odd sensation which he chose to ignore, simply looking back at her. Charity had done something to make her eyes larger, her cheeks rosier. She had constructed a tiered dress entirely out of cake, huge rosette whorls shifting from white to pink, a bodice made of sculpted fondant, sequined with glimmering sugar crystals.

"I'm doing the lifts, though," she said, her smile growing. "I like a man I can throw around."

"Lovely," Severus said drily, escorting her to the dance floor. The headmaster was already there, leading Madame Maxime in a waltz. Ludo Bagman had seized McGonagall, who was too well-mannered to knee the man in the groin. She, too, knew that expecting her child-champion to dance necessitated her dancing as well. Percy Weasley bowed to Sprout, who looked no different than she did while tending her plants. He led the stout, elderly witch towards Bagman and McGonagall, clearly avoiding Severus' son.

Severus had no time to think about his son's ill-advised date to the Yule Ball. Charity had placed a hand firmly on his waist and was watching him with an amused expression.

“Changed my mind,” she said, taking his wrist and placing his hand on her bare shoulder. It was soft, and warm. “I don’t want you to squish the frosting.”

“What compelled you to wear such a garment?” Severus asked. “Can it even be considered a garment?”

“I thought it was funny,” Charity said, her lovely, stormy eyes sparkling like the sea.

Severus sighed, and allowed Charity to take the lead.

Monty watched Luna twirl around, smiling because she was smiling. She looked like a slip of moonlight, resplendent in an arctic night sky. The slow song finally ended, the bagpipe player wheezing a final, drawn note. Monty bowed to Luna, as best he could. She bowed back. Monty straightened, taking a look around the now full dance floor. He spotted Neville with Ginny, who was standing on one foot and grabbing the other while Neville apologized. Herimione looked like she was having a good time with Krum, though it was weird to think of someone like Krum—older, a professional quidditch player, someone who made Monty feel childish in comparison—dating one of his classmates. He couldn’t see Ron anywhere, but he spotted George wearing Ron’s frilly old dress robes, looking unusually serious as he parted with Harry.

He looked at Harry for a moment. Monty had always found robes a bit silly, like big, floppy dresses. Harry’s robes didn’t give him that impression. Harry was...regal. He even made George’s ridiculous, moth-eaten robes look distinguished by association.

“Harry’s really cool, isn’t he?” Luna said, looking admiringly at the older boy.

Monty nodded. Harry looked like a champion, more so than the hunching, sullen Viktor Krum, or the arrogant and flashy Fleur Delacour.

Harry looked like a prince.

A new song began at a faster tempo, something Monty recognized from the wireless. Luna grabbed his hands, and began swinging him around wildly. Everything was a blur, and the thoughts flew out of Monty’s head. He braced himself, catching Luna and spinning her instead. Her feet lifted from the ground, light as a feather, into the sky. The other dancers scattered as Monty and Luna cleared a swathe of the dance floor, laughing like maniacs.

When the waltz ended, Percy bent over and lightly kissed the back of Professor Sprout’s dirt-streaked hand. She tutted at him, excusing herself from the dance floor before it got wild.

Percy had, unwillingly, seen the Weird Sisters perform before, and was intimately aware of how popular they were with Hogwarts students. He knew Harry wasn't a fan of them. Harry found the music derivative.

Harry.

Percy could not comprehend what had compelled Harry to take one of his younger brothers to the Yule Ball. Surely there were plenty of others he could have chosen. Would Harry have attended with a girl? No, it wasn't in his nature to shy away from that aspect of his life. It was one of the few things Harry didn't explicitly conceal about his identity.

Why George? Was it because he too was a Weasley? The only way Harry could have possibly chosen a worse partner was if he had invited Ron. Ron, who was still sitting at his table, one of the Patil twins unhappily sitting beside him. Ron, who was glaring at the dance floor as the music picked up, ignoring his own date.

Why did it have to be *George*? George, in those heinous robes their mother had purchased for Ron, still under the delusion Ron liked the color maroon. Ron, who was instead wearing plain cobalt robes, a match for Fred's, something decent the twins had purchased for themselves.

Percy skirted around the dancers, their movements growing more frantic as the Weird Sisters indulged the crowd with one of their hits. Harry had released George as soon as the first song ended, turning instead to seek out his Slytherin friends. George, who had behaved with unusual tact. Who had done nothing to sabotage the opening dance. A dance which rightfully should have been *his*.

George began a frenetic dance around Fred and Angelina Johnson, pulling Lee Jordan and Katie Bell into their orbit. Harry seized Mafalda—Percy gaped at his little cousin, who looked like an irate daffodil—and placed her on the shoulders of another Slytherin, Gregory Goyle, like he was a pack mule. Harry's best friend, Astrid Urquhart, seemed to be having some sort of dance fight with Alicia Spinnet, stomping around and punching the air. A girl wearing a horrific shade of orange—Tracey Davis, on the Slytherin gobstones team—flew across the dance floor, shrieking. Ginny appeared behind Goyle and began scaling his back, while Mafalda steered the poor boy closer to the stage. Another of Harry's friends, Terence Higgs, along with a sturdy girl wearing the blood red of Durmstrang, jumped like rabbits, joined by others, making the floor shake. A few people were still attempting to waltz, pivoting through the crowd, among them the other sixth-year Slytherin prefect, Jasmine Rookwood, led by one of the Slytherin chasers, Adrian Pucey, more entranced by Rookwood than Fleur Delacour's blank-eyed partner was with her.

A boy Percy suspected was from Beauxbatons approached Ron and Patil. Patil took the boy's hand and left without a backwards glance, freeing a seat for Percy.

It had been a mistake to attend the Yule Ball without informing his siblings. Without informing Harry. He had thought to surprise Harry, perhaps exchange a few words, present him with the gift burning a hole in Percy's pocket.

“What are you doing here?” Ron asked, with only a trace of his typical animosity.

“I’m here for work,” Percy said, taking the seat next to him. He looked in the same direction as Ron, immediately spotting the target of his antipathy. Hermione Granger was laughing and dancing with Viktor Krum. It was not difficult to connect the dots. Only years of strict self-control prevented Percy from directing that same caustic envy at Harry.

He was jealous.

Percy was jealous that George had done something he was too afraid to do.

“Then go work,” Ron said bitterly.

“Why aren’t you with your friends?” Percy asked. He was too used to Ron’s petulance for it to bother him much. He had known Ron his entire life.

Ron snorted, his eyes not leaving Hermione.

Percy sighed. Ron didn’t do well with direct confrontation. Or *any* confrontation. He was much like their mother in that regard. He imagined Ron had very recently become aware of his interest in Hermione, that seeing her with another boy—not that Viktor Krum was a *boy*, he was already eighteen—had brought those feelings to the surface. Percy understood, better than Ron could know.

“You’re acting like a child,” Percy said, pushing derision into his voice. “Then again, you *are* a child.”

Ron turned angrily towards him. “I’m not!”

“Yes, you are,” Percy said, looking down at him. “I’m frankly embarrassed to be associated with you. This is an extremely important event, not just for me, but for Hogwarts *and* the Ministry.”

“Oh, so *that’s* what it’s about,” Ron said acidly. “You’re worried I’ll make you look bad. As usual.” Ron stood abruptly. “You can piss right off. I’m getting a drink.”

Percy sat back, watching as his brother stormed away towards the long table of refreshments. At the same time, Monty and Luna were approaching the table, along with Ginny and Neville. He knew Ron would never take his advice. Percy could only hope Ron’s friends would draw him out of his sulk.

He turned away from the scene, scanning the crowd. Like Harry, he was not a particular fan of the Weird Sisters. He had heard far too much of them from Ginny’s room during the summer holiday. There was no one of particular note in attendance. Mr. Bagman he already knew, as well as all of his former professors. Professor Snape was, incongruously, dancing with Professor Burbage. Percy had never seen a more odd couple.

There was no utility in him socializing with the Durmstrang or Beauxbatons students; there were more appropriate connections to be formed among their peers. Karkaroff and Madame Maxime could find better conversation among their own peers, discussing magical pedagogy

or whatever professors did in their free time. None would appreciate Percy's unlettered opinions on such topics.

Another song ended, and Percy watched Fred and George approach Mr. Bagman. Mr. Bagman looked nervous now that he wasn't being protected by Professor McGonagall's intimidating presence. He scanned the Great Hall, his eyes finding Percy. Mr. Bagman smiled awkwardly at him, then turned to address Fred and George. Percy narrowed his eyes as a bag passed from Mr. Bagman's hands into theirs. Mr. Bagman looked at him again, nodded, then stepped back into the fray. Moments later, Percy saw him dancing with Professor Sinistra, who seemed rather like a bird of prey as she loomed over him.

Percy crossed his arms. He wanted, more than anything, to dance with Harry. Just once. Simply dancing with another boy did not make one gay. George had proven that. It hadn't bothered him at all. George, who, along with Fred, flagrantly violated every rule for the simple joy of breaking them. Harry's friends didn't mind either, taking turns wheeling him around, dancing wildly, enjoying themselves.

Percy sat alone.

Another song ended, and he watched as Harry waved off his friends, looking as composed as when he had first stepped into the Great Hall. In that moment, Percy had stopped breathing.

Even now he was breathless, watching as Harry skirted the table laden with bottles of butterbeer, steaming cauldrons of mulled mead, hollowed out pumpkins with chilled pumpkin juice, Mr. Filch standing guard over the gillywater and firewhiskey for the adults. Harry walked past it all, slipping through a door and onto the grounds.

Percy stood immediately, oblivious to everything around him. The pounding music, the crowd of students shouting along with the lyrics, ghosts streaming in and out through the walls and ceiling, Peeves popping up behind the refreshments tables, chased by a rattling, furious Bloody Baron, others taking a break from the dancing to explore the gardens.

Percy stood, and he followed.

Madeleine, Princess of Mercia, crouched under a thorny bush. The bush smelled very strong, so her mouth was open as she sniffed the air. Tiny flying creatures were everywhere, their wings loud and buzzy, their giggling voices high pitched and tinny. Madeleine's ears twitched irritably. The fairies made her job more difficult.

The orange tom, Crookshanks, was already prowling. He hunted the same quarry as she. The woman-who-may-be-an-animal. Her boy was like that. Her boy sometimes became a squirrel, with a bushy tail he liked to tease her with. A squirrel was no match for her, but the squirrel was her boy.

Her boy walked past the bush Madeleine hid under. He paused, then crouched down. How had he seen her?

“I thought you had a date,” her boy said, smiling at her. He carefully reached between the big flowers and spiky stems, scratching her back in just the right spot. Her eyelids fell, then she bristled. Madeleine could not be distracted. She softly meowed to let her boy know this.

He was a very smart boy, smarter than the other humans. He understood Madeleine. The boy’s eyes narrowed, though he kept scratching her back.

“We don’t know for sure,” the boy whispered. “But thank you. I’ll be careful.”

Madeleine purred her approval. Her boy was *very* smart. He had found the dog-man, and the rat-man. She would protect him.

Crookshanks knew about the humans-who-became-animals. He had his girl to protect, the girl who cried in secret. The woman made the girl cry. The woman made Madeleine’s boy angry.

The boy stood, almost blending into the night. “You’re the best cat in the world,” he said under his breath. “And the cutest.” Then he walked away, trusting Madeleine to watch over him.

Madeleine’s whiskers twitched proudly. The boy spoke no lie.

The rose garden was not as private a locale as Harry had anticipated. He was not the first person to have thought to have a rendezvous among the rose bushes, fountains, and statuary. Lady Madeleine was slinking around, on the lookout for Rita Skeeter. A few professors were patrolling the garden. He watched his dad blast a rose bush apart, exposing the Head Boy and Head Girl in a romantic clinch. They ran away as Professor Burbage laughed. That was going to make prefect meetings awkward, though nowhere near as horrible as when Percy and Penelope Clearwater had been in those roles.

Percy.

Harry had to talk to him.

He kept to the less traveled paths, stealing past couples sitting on benches with heads tipped together, more tumbling around the rose bushes or hiding in the shadows of massive stone reindeer. He saw Karkaroff stalking around, apparently searching for someone. A tall fountain emerged from the darkness, and Harry saw Hagrid and Madame Maxime pressed together, talking in their version of hushed voices. He glimpsed Fleur bewitching Roger Davies nearby and turned sharply away, moving deeper into the garden.

The further Harry walked down the paths, the more quiet it became. It was a winter evening, and while the snow had been vanished it was still very cold. The night sky was clear, an endless field of stars above him. Away from the life and warmth of the castle, the garden was still and silent. Even the fairies had not strayed so far. The sprawling rose garden stretched almost to the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Harry came to the end of a path. There was a lone bench, as if put there solely for him, flanked by roses so red they were nearly black in the dim moonlight.

Harry took out his wand, silencing charms falling easily from his lips. He trusted Lady Madeleine, but he peered in the darkness for any sign of motion, any indication he was being followed by some animal. He kicked a few rose bushes, checked under the bench.

“*Homenum revelio*,” Harry whispered as a last resort. His skin prickled, and he turned to face the path.

Percy stood there, haloed by the faint light from the castle, the fairies flickering across the broad expanse of the garden. Harry openly stared at him. Percy, in his robes that could have been cut from the sky itself, the cold wind and silver moonlight turning his coppery curls molten. His glasses, slipping down his elegant, freckled nose.

Percy stared back at him, his lips slightly parted, his chest rising and falling with labored breath.

“Did you run after me?” Harry asked quietly, carefully approaching him.

Percy swallowed, his expression darkened. “Why did you go with George?”

Harry stopped in front of Percy, looking into his hazel eyes. He was livid. He was *jealous*.

“I caught him and Fred in Hogsmeade in fourth year,” Harry said. “At the Hog’s Head. They owed me a favor. I called it in.”

Percy narrowed his eyes. “You were in the Hog’s Head?”

“I doubt I’ll go there again,” Harry said, stepping closer. Percy’s breath hitched, though he stood his ground. “Dumbledore’s brother owns the place. Is this really what you want to do out here, Percy?” He crossed his arms, holding himself back. “Don’t you have something for me?”

All semblance of rationality was abandoned as Percy followed Harry through the sprawling maze of the rose garden. It was an enchanted winter garden, the roses bushes in full bloom, exuding their heady fragrance into the chill air. Fairies flew from blossom to blossom, chattering with each other, illuminating clandestine meetings in their prismatic glow. The stone paths twisted and crossed each other, tricking those strolling through into longer

sojourns. Harry passed into the shadows, barely discernible, illusive and enigmatic. He was too cunning, too unfailingly kind to allow Percy to confront him in full view of others.

Percy advanced, heedless of propriety, decorum, the demands of his job. Blood coursed through him in a fervid, yearning rush that made his head spin

His elusive quarry led him to the end of it all, where paths melded with the snowy grounds. The rose bushes thinned, the petals of their blossoms spread out, exhausted. Harry waited for him, his head lifted towards the sky. The charm in his hair, a hairpin from which small, delicate flowers hung like bells, glowed a soft white against his pitch black strands. Harry slid his wand into his robes, then turned to face him.

Percy was struck dumb with his presence. The unceasing passage of time stuttered as Harry approached him. His gaze lingered on Harry's mouth as it formed words. Soft lips he longed to trace, the slight bump in an aquiline nose he dreamed of kissing. Harry looked up at him, his skin a radiant alabaster, luminous in the bitter moonlight. Long lashes framed his eyes, black as the deepest night, reflecting the ancient light of remote and forgotten stars above them.

"Don't you have something for me?" Harry asked, his lips curved in a coy smile. It made Percy's mouth go dry.

Harry needed a dance partner. Someone owed him a favor. There was nothing else to it.

"Yes," Percy breathed. "Yes, I do."

Harry tilted his head, watching him expectantly. Percy willed his hands to stop shaking, reaching into his robes. He reminded himself to breathe. He glanced at the hairpin Harry wore. It was exquisite, nothing Percy could afford. There was nothing Percy could offer to someone who deserved the world.

But Harry was watching him. It was far too late for doubts.

Percy gripped the object in his pocket, and before he could second guess himself he reached for Harry's crossed arms. At his touch, Harry relaxed, allowing Percy to take his hand.

"I hope this is not too forward of me," Percy said, slipping a ring over Harry's right forefinger. He had found it in a muggle store. It was nothing special, just a simple black band which had reminded him of Harry, as everything always did.

"A promise ring?" Harry asked, staring at his hand. Percy watched, enraptured, as Harry's cheeks lightly pinked, like a bruised petal.

"I am not familiar with the concept," Percy said faintly.

Harry's eyes snapped up to him, pinning him in place. Percy was still holding his hand, but Harry was free to reach up. He wrapped winter-chilled fingers around the back of Percy's neck, drawing him inevitably closer, breathing life into him with the soft press of his lips.

Percy pulled back with a sigh. It wasn't yet midnight. There was still time.

He turned Harry's hand over, lacing their fingers together.

Percy kissed the back of Harry's hand, then asked, "May I have this dance?"

Chapter End Notes

[Fanart](#) for the this chapter by trisarutops

and another [piece](#) by UnfriendlyMollusk

Both incredibly skilled!

Black Water

Chapter Summary

December 1994

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The sun had already risen when Percy awoke the morning after the Yule Ball. He could not recall when he had left Hogwarts, nor when he returned to the Burrow. Time had lost all meaning in the rose garden, under the moonlight, with Harry. Percy could scarcely remember what they had spoken of, sitting on a lone bench, gazing into the unrelenting darkness of the Forbidden Forest. The hush of the trees had swallowed all sound, but he could feel the solid presence of Harry's arms around him, sweet kisses that punctuated the words that passed between them.

Percy sat up in bed, squinted at the handsome robes carelessly thrown over his chair. He stared at the blurry blue fabric, heat creeping up his face as he remembered how Harry had worked his fingers down his collars, up his sleeves, anywhere that could be reached. They had been utterly shameless.

The guilt began to sink in as Percy continued looking at the robes. He was older. He was a Ministry employee. Harry was months from being of age, and would be a student for a year after that. Percy didn't know what he had been thinking. He hadn't been thinking at all. Seeing Harry dance with George, seeing Viktor Krum with Hermione. Eighteen and sixteen did not seem quite that wide a gap. That distance became shorter every time he saw Harry.

He was only dimly aware that he no longer felt guilty that the one he wanted was another boy. His *young man*, as Aunt Muriel had begun to say. One whom he had inadvertently expressed a possessory interest in.

Percy's face burned. Harry had explained what a gift of a ring meant, though it was something Harry had only heard of in passing. From an American music magazine, of all things. It had never occurred to Percy that a plain piece of jewelry could symbolize anything. He simply thought it would suit Harry. He wore earrings, why not a ring?

There was a knock at his door, and his mother opened it without waiting for a response. Thankfully, it was only a crack through which she could speak.

"Percy?" she said quietly. "Are you awake, dear?"

"Yes," Percy said, his voice raspy. How long had he spent talking to Harry? He cleared his throat and tried again. "Yes, mother."

“Oh, good,” she said, pushing the door open more so she could peek in. “I’ve got breakfast ready. Your father’s already awake. I can’t wait to hear all about the Yule Ball!”

Percy nodded absently, reaching for his glasses. “I shall be down forthwith.”

His mother laughed lightly then retreated, leaving the door ajar. Percy had spent too much time wondering about that habit of hers. He doubted his mother was aware she did it. He suspected it had to do with the war, or perhaps having raised so many young children at the same time. Not wanting to dwell on it, Percy got out of bed, properly hung his dress robes so they would not wrinkle, found an old set of robes that looked more like a potato sack than anything he would wear in public, then walked downstairs.

His father, as promised, was already awake and reading the *Daily Prophet*. Percy would read his later. He had the day off, Mr. Crouch was still out of the office, and it would be weeks until he saw Harry again. Poor Hermes would end up like Errol one day if Percy attempted a daily correspondence. And his siblings would know Hermes, would wonder why the same screech owl kept returning to the Slytherin table.

Percy could tell it would be a restful Boxing Day. The kitchen was warm, suffused with the scent of baking bread, the sizzle of eggs and bacon. The Burrow was snug against the winter that had taken hold outside. The chickens were nestled in their coop, the pigs safely in their straw litter, heated by warming charms Percy had helped apply to their shelter. The pond was frozen over, the geese and ducks flown away for the season. The ghoul was indolent, his rattling of pipes less enthused.

It felt like home. Comforting, peaceful, familiar. Percy, his mother, his father. He could almost imagine he was an only child, that he had nothing to worry about other than what he wanted to do for the day. This fleeting, liminal space between his childhood and the rest of his life.

When his mother set a plate of eggs and bacon before him, Percy realized he hadn’t taken his litorin. It worked best if he took it before a meal. It wouldn’t kill him to take it afterwards, but it would not be as effective.

“Thank you,” Percy said, picking up his fork. He could have more meals with his parents. He could get to know them as individuals, not just as parents. Who they were outside of their roles as mother and father. They could get to know him too.

“So, how was it?” his mother asked. She looked less troubled, less careworn with fewer mouths to feed, fewer children to keep in some semblance of order.

“How was what?” Percy asked. He set the fork down, instead picking up a cup of tea that had poured itself.

“The Yule Ball!” his mother said excitedly. “What was it like? Who did everyone go with? Did you dance with anyone?” Her eyes brightened. “Did you meet anyone?”

Percy swallowed, not knowing where to begin. “No,” he said to her last question. “It was predominantly attended by school children and professors, if you disregard the Weird

Sisters.”

His mother wrinkled her nose, though her cheeks were still pink with amusement. Percy dutifully described the food, the decorations, the rose garden, plumbing his memory for details. So much of it had been overshadowed by memories of Harry.

“Ginny was with Neville Longbottom,” Percy said, knowing his sister had been recalcitrant in her letters. He didn’t mention Mafalda, who was proving to be as difficult as the twins.

“I thought she might go with Monty,” his mother said, frowning slightly.

“No,” Percy said, not knowing where she had got that impression. Ginny’s infatuation with Monty was one-sided, so far as he knew. “Monty went with Luna Lovegood.”

“Really?” his mother said. “Well, that’s nice.”

“I saw Ron with one of the Patil sisters, Parvati I believe,” Percy said, not nearly as invested in the topic as his mother. He was only concerned with who one person went with, and besides had always disdained the gossip at Hogwarts. “Fred went with Angelina Johnson.”

His mother’s expression grew dreamy. Percy vividly recalled a conversation she once had with Ginny and Hermione. Love potions. He shied away from what else that brief exchange had led to. So much had changed since then.

“What about George?” his mother asked.

Percy picked up his fork again. “He was escorted by Harry Evans.”

The kitchen grew silent. Percy cut off a piece of egg, his mind and body calm. It was only a matter of time before the information got back to her. George would send her a framed photograph of the opening dance if he could.

“Harry Evans?” his mother said in a strained voice.

“Yes,” Percy said, glancing at her. “The Hogwarts champion. He required a dance partner with whom to open the ball.”

His mother struggled to form a response. “But, why couldn’t he have taken a girl? He could have taken Ginny, she would have loved that!”

“Evans is homosexual,” Percy said evenly. “It is only logical he would seek a male partner.”

“Of course it would be George,” she muttered. “Always up to no good! I can’t even imagine what everyone must have thought. In front of foreign schools. And their professors! Oh, goodness.” His mother sat back in her chair, fanning herself. His father looked up from the *Daily Prophet*.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“George went with Harry to the Yule Ball,” his mother explained. “Oh, honestly, Arthur!”

His father smiled slightly, then went back to reading the *Daily Prophet*. “They’re boys, Molly. You know the twins, always looking to get a rise out of you.”

His mother shook her head. “Well, I hope George gets his head on straight! I have no idea what they’ll do after Hogwarts.” She sighed, then smiled at Percy again. “What about you, dear?”

Percy broke apart a piece of bacon, little crispy bits littering his plate. “For the opening, I danced with Professor Sprout.”

“That was very sweet of you,” his mother said, looking pleased that one of her sons was well-behaved. Though, she had no objections to Fred and Ron.

“And,” Percy continued, bracing himself, “I danced with Evans.”

His mother’s expression froze.

“He is an excellent dancer,” Percy continued. “Hogwarts is fortunate to have such an accomplished student as the school’s champion.”

“Monty’s the Hogwarts champion,” his mother said faintly.

“No,” Percy said. “Harry is. We’ve established Monty is an unwilling participant. Harry Evans is not.”

Percy knew the last was untrue, but Harry, whatever means his name got into the Goblet of Fire, had been chosen. If anything underhanded had taken place, it was meant well.

His mother blinked, then looked at him. “Right. Well. It sounds like a lovely time.” She began smiling again. “It makes me wish I was back at Hogwarts!”

Percy nodded, abandoning his breakfast for more tea. “Me too.”

While a weaker person might have spent his Boxing Day in repose, Harry had made his way to the solitude of the library. Seeing Percy, talking to Percy, being able to touch Percy, had reminded him of something the Triwizard Tournament had superseded.

Ministry internship applications were due.

Harry thought the Ministry of Magic was fucked. It was a den of corruption, nepotism, and incompetence. Before, after, during the Dark Lord’s time, the same problems had plagued it. There were plenty of good people who worked there. Harry knew some of them. People who kept their heads down and did their jobs.

One of Percy's most admirable qualities was his drive to change the Ministry, using the tools their government provided. It was a daunting task for one eighteen year old wizard, but Percy had already advanced so far in such a short period of time. Harry knew Percy was intelligent and hardworking enough to have earned promotions on merits alone, but it was still surprising that Percy was the personal assistant to a department head only a few months after getting his N.E.W.T.s. There was a dearth of adequate candidates. Harry had heard enough about the antics of Bertha Jorkins to know that.

The pay was shit, the hours were also shit, but working at the Ministry meant being near Percy. Harry wasn't keen on working in the Portkey Office again, or working in Magical Games even if Captain Lament was there to keep things interesting. He wouldn't be able to tolerate taking orders from Ludo Bagman. He also needed to avoid the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, which was presently experiencing an infestation of Diggorys.

As Harry filled out an application, safely tucked away in the Restricted Section, he considered his options. The Committee on Experimental Charms would be fun, if only to see what sorts of things people came up with. Half of them ended up in St. Mungo's.

That left Harry with either the Improper Use of Magic office, which meant working with Percy's dad, or something in the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. There wasn't an option for the Department of Mysteries. It was the sort of department known, but not advertised. Harry had no idea how to get a foot in. He doubted winning tournaments was a prerequisite.

They'd probably stick him with the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee. Based on what Percy had told him, it was a lot of paperwork.

Percy *loved* paperwork.

Smiling to himself, Harry finished his application and hurried to the Owlery. He couldn't wait for summer.

The school had assembled for the Frog Choir's Yule concert. Most years, the performance would have taken place on Yule, but the Yule Ball had taken precedence. The ball hadn't even been held on Yule, which Phoebe and Felipe had frequently grumbled and croaked about. Presently, Phoebe was in high spirits, content the performance had been given an almost as prominent date. It was New Year's Eve, and the dulcet tones of students and frogs ushered in the new year.

The tables in the Great Hall had once again been cleared away, replaced by chairs all facing another conjured stage. Phoebe had Felipe cradled in her arms, wearing robes in frost white, singing happily along as Professor Flitwick conducted the choir.

Harry had his arms crossed, hidden in his sleeves, listening politely to a discordant Auld Lang Syne. At his side, Astrid was singing under her breath. Her mood had continued to improve in the week since the Yule Ball. Harry wasn't sure whether she and Alicia Spinnet were dating, but he had caught Astrid sneaking out of the common room with her broom several times.

The atmosphere in Hogwarts had changed since the ball. All the anticipation for Christmas had been spent, and the week between the holiday and the start of winter term was subdued. Some students had got together, or broken up, after the ball. Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang could be seen strolling through the corridors, holding hands. Viktor Krum still lurked in the library, though now he occasionally spoke to Hermione. There were tracks in the snow leading from the Durmstrang ship and Beauxbatons carriage. Plans for dates to Hogsmeade were being made.

As Phoebe continued to drown out the rest of the Frog Choir with the help of her winged frog, Harry played with the new ring on his finger. His friends had noticed it, of course. They had noticed him not returning to the Great Hall, or to his dormitory until well after midnight. It wasn't a stretch for them to determine who he had been with. Harry hoped no one else had made note of Percy's absence, though Fred and George kept giving him significant looks at every meal.

Lady Madeleine, and, to Harry's surprise, Crookshanks had not been successful in tracking Rita Skeeter down. Harry didn't know if she had been at the Yule Ball at all, but if she had it was nowhere near him. Lady Madeleine had made sure of it.

No journalists, few photographs. It was really an event for Hogwarts, and the visiting schools. Skeeter's interest in the fabricated love lives of students had, hopefully, died out.

Harry clapped politely when the song ended. Phoebe threw out her arms, flinging Felipe into the air to fly above them, croaking happily. Astrid glanced at his hand, a sly smile growing on her face.

"Shut up," Harry said, grinning as Felipe did an awkward lap overhead. He still wasn't used to the moth wings, though he could do a decent enough glide.

A bell resounded through the Great Hall, declaring the hour had come. Astrid slid her arm through Harry's, locking them together. Someone had set off fireworks, which careened across the ceiling.

"Happy new year," she said, jostling him.

"Yeah," Harry said, dodging an attempted headlock from Adrian. "Happy new year."

“Happy fucking new year,” Adrian growled, hacking at the ice encasing the Black Lake. They could have used their wands, but Harry thought letting Adrian take his feelings out on the ice was a better idea. Sometimes it was more fun to do things the muggle way.

Harry played with his ring, glancing at the hulking shadow of the Durmstrang ship near the shore. He couldn’t see the Beauxbatons carriage at all.

“Just. Wants. To. Be. Friends,” Adrian grunted, chips of ice flying up around him. It had started to snow, which wasn’t ideal, but term was starting on Monday and Harry was running out of time.

“You’re still on about that?” Astrid asked. She, like Harry, was keeping an eye out for any onlookers. It was the dead of night, and other than Adrian and the sound of ice breaking, the grounds were silent. They hadn’t even lit their wands, not wanting to be seen.

Adrian stood upright, pushing sweaty hair away from his forehead. “Fuck you. You too, Harry. Fucking traitors.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Harry said, walking over to examine Adrian’s work. He hadn’t made much progress.

“You two were *just talking*?” Adrian panted. “Bull. Shit.”

“I took a turn about the garden,” Harry said lightly. “I needed fresh air.”

Astrid scoffed. “I am simply attempting to destabilize a rival team with my feminine wiles. You like that sort of thing, right, Adrian? What was that you called Haz? A honeypot?”

“You see, the thing is, Astrid,” Adrian said, catching his breath. Harry took out his wand and cast a discreet *diffindo*. “The thing is, when you get off with a quidditch player, they’re going to play *better* to impress you. You fucking slag.”

A neat circle of ice cracked, and Harry levitated it out of the way.

“I didn’t even get a pity snog,” Adrian said dolefully, tossing the hatchet away. It burst into snow on impact, the transfiguration falling apart. “Said she’s *not ready for a relationship*. Who talks about *relationships*?”

“Jasmine,” Harry said, crouching down next to the hole in the ice. The water was completely black.

“Not like I asked her to be my girlfriend,” Adrian mumbled. Harry looked up at him. He knew Adrian was genuinely upset that Jasmine didn’t seem interested. Harry didn’t entirely buy it. He suspected Jasmine didn’t want to tie herself too strongly to Britain. Her mother had, and it had nearly cost her everything.

“Don’t be such a baby,” Astrid said, joining Harry at the edge of the ice. “I saw Cas *shake hands* with Endo, like he’d just had an interview with her. Pity snogs, for fuck’s sake.”

Adrian sighed, then walked over to look into the hole. “Are we doing this or what? Don’t fancy freezing my goolies off.”

Astrid was already taking her robes off. “Will you be okay with your shellfish thing?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. He put his wand between his teeth, speaking around it as he undressed. “I don’t think there are any crustaceans in there, but there’s so much water it won’t affect me. And I’ve got a potion for it.” He folded his robes neatly and set them down, wearing only his swim shorts and binder.

Astrid already knew, and didn’t care. Adrian hadn’t even noticed. He was down to his pants, hissing and hopping from foot to foot.

“Warming charms,” Adrian said, pointing his wand at various body parts. “Forgot the bloody warming charms.”

“It’ll be colder in the water,” Harry said, casting a Bubble Head charm over himself. It rippled slightly, but settled. He sat down at the edge of the hole, then slowly lowered himself into the frigid, black water. “See you cunts at the bottom.”

Chapter End Notes

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[Fanart](#) for the previous chapter by trisarutops

Fruits de mer

Chapter Summary

January 1995

The notice in the common room had drawn the attention of all of the sixth-years, and a few seventh-years who had yet to get their apparition licenses.

“Twelve galleons,” Phoebe read, patting her robes down. She glanced at Harry, then began patting more frantically.

“I’m going to breakfast,” Harry said, turning away from the sign. Even with liberal application of warming charms, the icy waters of the Black Lake had frozen him to the bone. He could cast a Bubble Head charm, he could even swim for an hour. Finding the merpeople village had taken *much* longer. Since he, Astrid, and Adrian had broken another hole into the ice and clawed their way out, Harry hadn’t stopped picturing his little brother in those stygian waters.

He wasn’t up to being the poor muggleborn that day.

“We can cover it,” Phoebe declared, having followed him out of the common room. “It’s only two galleons each.”

Harry sighed as Adrian threw an arm around his shoulders. “Worth every knut.”

They hadn’t even made it out of the dungeons.

They were all excited to begin apparition. It was an exciting magic, going from one place to another in an instant, and fundamentally different from anything they learned at Hogwarts. Harry knew it could be broadly classed as a sort of transportation magic, like floo powder and portkeys, but those were also starkly different from charms and transfiguration.

Charming something such as where one was located in the world was beyond the scope of what a charm was; location was too relative, physically and conceptually. And the apparator was not simultaneously vanished and conjured, as could be done with transfiguration. Magical humans were violative of Gamp’s Law, and moreover it introduced the quandary of whether one was the same person after apparition, or merely a copy.

Harry listened as his friends, and the seventh-years who had either failed or never attempted the apparition test, talked about the upcoming lessons. Complaining about older cousins and siblings who flaunted their ability to apparate, noting how convenient it was, sharing what it felt like to be side-alonged.

Apparition, by its very nature, manipulated space and time. Examining it too closely was one reason many witches and wizards failed to apparate at all. Muggleborns often had this particular issue, not having as much faith in magic as those raised with it. There was often a skepticism, a lingering fear that none of it was real.

Harry waited until they were all seated at the Slytherin table to say anything about the twelve galleon lessons.

“It’s alright,” Harry said quietly. “I appreciate the thought, but I have no intention of spending twelve weeks on a superfluous class.”

“Superfluous?” Cassius asked, giving Harry a piercing look.

“I already know how to apparate,” Harry said absently, his attention now on the bowl of steaming porridge that had appeared before him. It had been dressed with roasted hazelnuts, slices of poached pear, and drizzled with golden honey. Simply looking at it made Harry feel warmer.

His friends had fallen silent around him. Harry looked up, suddenly self-conscious.

“When?” Astrid asked, looking tense.

“Over holiday,” Harry said. “I *did* work in Magical Transportation, you know.”

Jasmine looked around, then leaned forward. “Harry,” she asked in a low tone, “how long have you been intentionally using magic? I don’t mean accidental magic, we’ve all done that. When did you *know* you could do magic?”

Harry was quiet for a moment, his appetite dwindling. They were not good memories Jasmine was asking after. So much of what he had done as a child had been out of pure necessity. “Since I was five or six, I think.”

“That’s not normal,” Terence said abruptly. Harry glanced at him. Terence shook his head vigorously. “I don’t mean it like it sounded.”

“I know I’m not normal,” Harry said evenly, picking up his spoon. He had to eat something. The house-elves had gone to the effort.

“Nice one, Terence,” Astrid said bitinglly.

“I didn’t mean it like that!”

“It’s not a bad thing,” Phoebe said anxiously. “Right?”

Harry lifted a spoonful of porridge to his mouth, not wanting to discuss his myriad abnormalities at breakfast. He wished he had lied about it, and had let them waste the twelve galleons. It wasn’t that much money to any of them.

“Most wizards cannot intentionally cast spells until they get their wand,” Cassius said. “And then, not without several months of instruction.”

“So?” Astrid demanded. “Harry’s better than them. Simple as. He’s always the first to get a new spell down.”

“Yes, he is,” Cassius said musingly. “Ever since the beginning. Turning a matchstick into a needle.”

Harry kept his head down and continued eating. The porridge did make him feel better.

The subject was thankfully dropped when the morning post arrived. The *Daily Prophet* owl who brought his copy gave the porridge a disdainful look, then hopped down the table for a piece of bacon from Killian’s place. Smiling faintly, Harry unrolled his paper.

His smile became painfully fixed when he saw the headline.

DUMBLEDORE’S GIANT MISTAKE

Harry stared at the photograph of Hagrid standing proudly next to his skrewt enclosure, holding up one of the seven foot monstrosities by a huge, curved sting.

“What is it?” Astrid asked, looking over his shoulder. “Fucking hell.”

Harry said nothing, too busy reading the article. Rita Skeeter had done a deep dive into Hagrid’s past. His expulsion from Hogwarts, being kept on as gamekeeper. His brief stint as Care of Magical Creatures professor, rendering the title of *professor* meaningless. The hippogriff attack, with no mention of the charges against Buckbeak being dropped.

Skeeter had devoted most of the article to Hagrid’s giant heritage. Giants had been driven to near extinction in Britain over the centuries, both from internal warring and giant-hunting. The aurors had wiped the rest of them out for working with the Dark Lord. The giants, like werewolves, like vampires, like all people branded *dark*, had been caught between both a Ministry and a Dark Lord who wanted them either eradicated or subjugated, and many had chosen the best chance for survival with the side that saw them as having some use.

Hagrid’s mother, a giantess named Fridwulfa, had left Britain decades before the Dark Lord made his first move. She had no connection to him, yet Skeeter had planted the seed of doubt. Hagrid’s mother was a giant, after all.

However, Skeeter hadn’t done her research well enough. She didn’t know why Hagrid was expelled. Hagrid had been a scapegoat for the Dark Lord, when he was still a student. It was important for context, which Skeeter often concealed from her readers.

Harry didn’t know how to feel about the article. He was glad Skeeter was taking a break from stalking his brother and manipulating the students around him into giving her information. At the same time, Hagrid didn’t deserve to have his private affairs aired for all of magical Britain to read. Harry didn’t think Hagrid had willingly told Skeeter about his giantess mother. Perhaps he would reveal such a thing to another half-giant, though Madame Maxime

would face even harsher backlash as a headmistress should she be exposed as part-giant. The timing of the article was suspect. The information was too hot for Skeeter to sit on for long. Had she been at the Yule Ball? Eavesdropping on Hagrid and Madame Maxime?

The thought left Harry's mind as soon as he got to the section about the blast-ended skrewts.

The skrewts.

While many have challenged the strictures imposed by the Ministry regarding crossbreeding and development of new magical creatures, the proof, as they say, is in the pudding.

Armed with venomous stings, toothed, funnel-like suckers to latch onto victims, and the ability to 'blast off' as promised in the name, the blast-ended skrewts are more than the sum of their parts. These highly dangerous crosses between fire crabs and manticores have been responsible for numerous injuries to students. The most egregious injury, for which Hagrid lost his position as Care for Magical Creatures instructor, was a severe allergic reaction a student had.

The student? None other than Harry Evans, a muggleborn participant in the Triwizard Tournament. Evans was hospitalized for nearly a week following his deadly encounter with the blast-ended skrewts.

An allergy is a muggle disease...

The paper roared with flames, causing Astrid to flinch away. It was incinerated in seconds. Harry stared at his hands, at the soot now coating his fingers.

Everyone was staring at him.

Harry clenched his jaw, knowing he had made the situation worse. Now people would be curious what had made him so visibly angry. He was supposed to have better control than that.

He reached a hand out to Terence, who silently gave up his copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

It was only a few lines. Only mentioned in passing. A little jab at him. Skeeter had reserved the last paragraph of the article for his brother. Harry nearly immolated Terence's paper at the woman using his brother *again* to peddle her bullshit.

It was all bigotry towards giants and half-giants. Why Skeeter wanted to stoke fear towards giants—placing their savior, the Boy Who Lived, in close, perilous proximity to one who was vicariously responsible for so many injured students—Harry could only speculate. Hagrid

had likely done something to set her off, or maybe Hagrid was a pawn to get at Dumbledore. Probably both, based on the title and the snipes at Dumbledore throughout.

Harry carefully set down the paper and went back to eating his porridge. Astrid picked it up right away, opening the article which Harry's childish outburst had called attention to. He swallowed, then looked at Jasmine and Cassius. Both were eyeing him warily.

"Did you two finish your translations?" he asked.

Jasmine's eyes darted around the Great Hall. She nodded. "Yes, I finished my translation."

"Leaving it a bit late, Harry," Cassius said, rolling up his own *Daily Prophet*. "It's due today."

"Filthy fucking halfbreed," Adrian growled.

Harry gave him a sharp look. Adrian had seized a copy of the *Prophet* from the Carrow twins, who were busy whispering to each other. About Hagrid. About Harry.

"It doesn't matter what *breed* he is," Jasmine said acidly.

Adrian grimaced. "Right. Sorry, Harry."

Harry shook his head and went back to his porridge. Everything was fine. Everything was normal.

"It's not you who has to be sorry," he said quietly, smiling at the sound of the head table cracking in two.

Severus glared at the dilapidated shack the imbecile called *home*.

"I want him gone," he said coldly. "Today. Now."

Dumbledore sighed, as if it were an unreasonable request. Severus turned to face him, watching as the headmaster stroked the head of his phoenix.

"I cannot do that, Severus," Dumbledore said, staring at one of the spinning silver instruments on his desk. "And I believe you have a class to teach."

"You *cannot*?" Severus asked, his voice tight with barely suppressed fury. "That bloody idiot spoke with Skeeter, after it had *explicitly* been made clear he was not to! He has not only exposed this school to repercussions from the Ministry from his feeble-minded efforts at breeding fire crabs and bloody *manticores*, but has revealed a student's private medical information!"

“I know, Severus,” Dumbledore said mildly. “I am very disappointed in Hagrid. However, he is not immune to the consequences of his own indiscretions.”

“Who gives a fuck?” Severus demanded. “What does that matter at all? He can blather about being a half-giant delinquent all he wants!”

“I doubt it happened in that manner,” Dumbledore began.

Severus slammed his fist on Dumbledore’s desk. The headmaster looked up at him.

“He put that boy’s *life* at risk,” Severus snarled. “Hagrid has proven time and time again he cannot be trusted, and yet you insist on sheltering him!”

Dumbledore sighed. “As I have sheltered you, Severus.”

Severus pulled back. “Don’t you dare use that against me. This is *not* about me.”

The headmaster raised his eyebrows. “Is it not? As I’ve said, I cannot let Hagrid go, in much the same way I cannot let Sybill go.”

Severus met the headmaster’s eyes. “Explain.”

Dumbledore sighed again, letting a hand rest on Fawkes’ back. “Hagrid is among the few who know Voldemort—” Severus winced, the mark that had become more clear over the months burning for a brief instant, like the strike of a match “—was once a boy named Tom Riddle.”

The headmaster stood, then walked towards the window to look down at Hagrid’s cabin. “Now, I doubt you want your third year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws to be in the potions lab unattended.”

“Very well,” Severus said, sneering. “This is not over, headmaster.”

“No,” Dumbledore said quietly, his eyes not leaving the dark and silent hut. “Some things never truly are.”

Percy set the *Daily Prophet* down. The creature depicted on the front page had been what initially caught his attention; he’d had no idea how large the blast-ended skrewts were, nor what they looked like. He could see the insectoid manticore origins, as it looked similar to a scorpion. Two massive scorpions with their heads cut off and joined at the abdomen, carapaced and segmented like a lobster. In the corner of the picture was a small puddle of vomit from the photographer. The frame tilted as he sicked up again.

The inclusion of Harry, painting him in such a malignant light, was reprehensible. Aunt Muriel would be reading the article. People at the Ministry. Their entire community would.

“What is it?” his mother asked anxiously. “You look rather upset, dear.”

Percy silently passed the *Daily Prophet* to her. His father had already been called in to the Ministry. Somehow Amos Diggory thought his father could help contain the fallout of neglecting to charge Hagrid for illegal crossbreeding. Arthur Weasley had a known penchant for cover-ups.

His mother tsked over the article. “Hogwarts is Hagrid’s home! I doubt the headmaster will kick him out over something like this. Giants, my word. I’ve never met a giant, but if they’re anything like Hagrid I doubt they’re as dangerous as this Skeeter woman claims!”

“Keep reading,” Percy said quietly, picking up his tea. He had a portkey scheduled to take him to Transylvania. This was his last meal with his mother for the week. He had hoped to enjoy it.

She continued reading, eventually pausing to look up at him. “She’s mentioned Harry here.” His mother made a strange face, as if reluctant to show any concern. “I didn’t know he was allergic to shellfish. You did mention the peanuts... A *muggle* disease. Well, what a way of putting it!”

Percy kept drinking his tea, listening to his mother until it was time for him to leave.

Since the Black Lake was frozen over, Professor Grubbly-Plank had found a unicorn for their first lesson of the new term. Monty stood back with the other boys, wishing she had gone to the effort of finding foals. The foals were less wary around boys, and were entirely gold. Luna could find unicorn foals. They would walk right up to her.

It was jarring to see a unicorn in the daylight. Everything was pale and grey in comparison to his pure white coat and golden hooves. Unicorns *looked* valuable, from their horns to their tails. The one Professor Grubbly-Plank captured was tethered to a tree, and clearly nervous around so many humans. He snorted, but allowed the girls to approach him, one mistrustful, iridescent eye trained on the shivering group of boys.

Such a wondrous creature could not distract Monty from what he had read in the *Daily Prophet* that morning. He didn’t care if Hagrid had a giantess for a mother. People had worse mothers, such as Draco Malfoy, who hadn’t stopped cracking jokes about Hagrid all lesson. Hagrid had already been sacked from being a professor, and it was all because of the blast-ended skrewts. And he had gone and told Rita Skeeter about Harry’s allergy.

That was why Monty was angry.

Monty gritted his teeth together, dutifully taking notes as Professor Grubbly-Plank began her lecture on the magical properties of unicorns. Monty already knew most of them. The bracelet Luna had given him, concealed by cloak and gloves, had sparked a brief but intense

interest in unicorns. Hair and horn were the most common ingredients harvested from unicorns. The books Monty had read contained no mention of unicorn blood, skin, or hoof. It seemed a lot of parts went to waste.

He knew Harry was angry too. Everyone did. Monty hadn't understood right away, why it was such a big deal if people knew about his allergies. Then he reread the article.

Muggleborn. Muggle disease. It made Harry sound like he was contagious, like *he* was diseased. Harry wasn't even a Triwizard champion to Skeeter, just a *participant*. She did that with Hermione too, always emphasizing that she was a muggleborn. It didn't matter, but it *did*.

Monty sighed and kept taking notes on things he already knew. He wasn't in the mood to ask Professor Grubbly-Plank about other unicorn parts.

By dinner, the entire school knew Harry had a muggle disease. Something that was normal, even common, in the muggle world was notable in the magical one. He was a freak.

His friends circled him like sharks, almost daring anyone to say anything, to try anything. It made Harry feel even weaker. He knew they meant well. They always did. It was another strike against him. They'd been accumulating since he'd first stepped onto the train in his dead mother's old robes. His braces, his accent, his poverty, his muggle origins. And now a disease the uneducated idiots around him assumed was an exclusively muggle affliction.

"Don't they have anything better to talk about?" Astrid grumbled, dropping into the seat next to him. Harry wasn't interested in eating dinner. He hadn't been hungry all day.

"Consensus is split," Cassius said. He was, hilariously, reading a book on conchomancy. Harry was convinced he had been saving it for a special occasion. "Muggleborns are indifferent, as many personally know muggles with allergies. Some may even have allergies themselves. The concept is not entirely unknown in the magical world, just much more obscure. Some in Ravenclaw have recalled that Penelope Clearwater has an allergy to kneazles."

Harry's eye twitched.

"More are interested in Hagrid's giant heritage," Cassius continued. The book's cover was made out of shells. *Messages from the Deep* sounded rather interesting, but Harry knew it was just geomancy with shells. Given they weren't near a coast, it wasn't very useful to Cassius at the moment. "He certainly...stands out more."

"Is that supposed to be a joke about his height?" Harry asked, glancing at the Ravenclaw table.

After the Yule Ball, the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students had joined them for more meals. Fleur Delacour was seated at the Ravenclaw table next to Roger Davies, eating *moules à la crème*. It made Harry's throat tingle, which had never before happened to him for simply being *around* shellfish. The skrewts had made him worse.

He was going to annihilate her in the Second Task.

Severus carefully, ever so carefully, extracted ichor from the blast-ended skrewt he had killed. He still had no idea how the skrewts fed, but theorized they passively absorbed magic, or each other. Both. They had no mouths, no digestive tracts, nothing. It was all skrewt.

There was a knock at the door, and he waved it open. Madam Pomfrey hesitated in the threshold, then walked through the translucent, membranous barrier that quarantined the skrewt room from the rest of the castle. It encased her in a thin film.

"What is this?" Pomfrey asked, looking around the skrewt laboratory. Severus was perfectly aware of what it looked like. Aborted arithmantic equations on the walls, jars of preserved skrewt parts, the reinforced skrewt pen that contained the two seven-foot survivors.

"I have been attempting to cure Evans' allergy," Severus said bluntly, a thread of caustic, bright blue skrewt blood writhing out of the incision he had made. He directed it into a vial.

Madam Pomfrey tutted, walking over to examine the dead skrewt that was splayed on his work table. "You should have approached me sooner. Severus, there are simply some things magic cannot cure. Healers soon learn that sometimes, more often than we like, the best we can do is treat the symptoms."

Severus knew that. He had known for weeks that his efforts were wasted, but he had to keep trying. It was his duty. It was his *son*.

Even he, the Hogwarts Potions Master, had a limit to his abilities.

Severus wanted to hurl the vial of precious, lethal skrewt blood against the wall.

What was the point in magic if it couldn't fix his son?

Papanași

Chapter Summary

January 1995

The portkey deposited Percy several blocks from his destination, in a park. In a skatepark, of all things, with structures Percy could only identify from conversations with Harry. It wasn't much. A ramp that had been painted blue, a rail that had also been painted blue. Both had begun to chip and rust. Both were more than the dungeon corridors had to offer in terms of obstacles.

Percy made a note of it if he and Harry ever happened to visit Cluj-Napoca together. He had, however, journeyed to the city in central Romania, in a region known as Transylvania, for business.

Casa Matia, the Corvinus Matthias House, stood at the end of a grey bricked street. The bricks fanned out in a radial pattern, abbreviated arcs that overlapped like scales. Most of this was hidden under a thin, crusty layer of snow, which crunched under Percy's shoes as he walked. The street was empty, and silent. The house itself was identical to its neighbors, white washed with a red roof, several white chimneys rising from the tiles, and an arched wooden door. It was, however, notable for both its age and the history attached to it. A king had been born in Casa Matia.

To the muggles, the house was an art museum. A Romanian flag—blue, yellow, and red—hung from one of the top windows.

It was a puzzling political situation for wizards. For muggles, Transylvania was not a country in its own right. It was a region of Romania. It did not have the same sovereignty the Transylvanian Ministry had established. The Ministry existed, in part, to contain the Romanian vampire population.

Percy avoided the main entrance, walking around Casa Matia to an old carriage entrance that led into a courtyard. Evergreen shrubs were cut into blocky shapes, and more snow-covered brick made paths through the topiary. Getting into the house was a simple *alohomora*.

Percy had yet to encounter any other witches or wizards, though he had passed someone who he believed was a dhampir, a half-vampire. Many worked for the Transylvanian Ministry, or were sent abroad to hunt vampires. Unlike vampires, they were allowed to carry wands.

The International Ban on Dueling was absurd. Percy had tried to understand Mr. Crouch's insistence that he speak with the Transylvanian Ministry's Head of Magical Cooperation. Romania hadn't signed the treaty. There was no reason to expect a magical government

contained entirely in Romania would sign it. And, if they did, no reason to expect it to be enforced. Aurors routinely dueled as part of their jobs; there was no unilateral use of magic when pursuing criminals. They fought back. Dueling was a regular part of instruction in Defense courses around the world. There were domestic dueling circuits, and the International Federation of Duelers, of which Professor Flitwick was a Master Dueler.

It would have been better if Mr. Crouch had gone himself. Percy adjusted his dark grey robes as he walked through the vacant corridors of the house. He had worn them in hopes of demonstrating the severity of the situation. He lacked the gravitas of Mr. Crouch. He also lacked the ability to speak Romanian.

An old wooden rope blocked off a staircase that led into the basement of the house. Percy looked around, frowning at a marble statue of nude men, some reaching towards the heavens, others in lonely recline, expressions of resignation and anguish on their stone faces. It didn't bode well.

Straightening his robes one last time, Percy stepped over the rope and walked down the staircase.

The first prefect meeting of the new year conflicted with gobstones practice. With both Harry and Killian being prefects, Tracey had been left in charge. Between her and Vincent, Harry hoped nothing would be permanently damaged. At the very least he knew Tracey would be able to keep their younger team members entertained.

After the publication of Skeeter's latest article, after having swam through the lightless, frigid waters of the Black Lake, everything had felt incredibly immature and immaterial to Harry. He didn't want to do anything. Homework, studying, gobstones, skateboarding, turn into a squirrel, read, spend time with his friends. Nothing.

His research into his brother's scar, what it could mean, had once more come to a dead end. The library had plenty to offer in terms of ghosts, poltergeists, dementors, boggarts, all sorts of spirits. He had not found a single mention of a *wraith*. Nothing on the soul itself. Nothing whatsoever on what the Killing Curse actually did. How it killed without leaving a mark. Harry could only speculate. When the body died, the soul sometimes remained, or an impression of it. There was proof of it all throughout Hogwarts, dozens of ghosts that ceaselessly drifted through the corridors. It was a facsimile of immortality, only half of the equation. Harry knew that the Dark Lord had sought immortality. He had wanted the Philosopher's Stone.

"We have an announcement from the headmaster," Head Girl Sarah Fawcett said.

Jasmine nudged him. Harry looked up, and saw both the Head Girl and Head Boy Stebbins were unusually serious. The entire meeting had been conducted with more professionalism. Both of them had been docked points for their rendezvous in the rose garden, for *conduct*

unbecoming a prefect. Harry was glad his dad hadn't stumbled upon him and Percy. He would never have lived it down.

"The kitchens will no longer be serving any shellfish," Sarah said. "Furthermore, anyone caught conjuring shellfish will be given a week's detention with Professor Snape."

"A week?" Haruka Endo asked, giving Harry a disparaging look. "Seems harsh."

"It is not for us to question the headmaster's decisions," Sarah said firmly. "One of your fellow prefects has a life-threatening disease. It is your responsibility to protect the welfare of the students, Miss Endo. Don't forget that."

Harry smiled thinly at Haruka's annoyance. He was not pleased at being the center of this sort of attention. Now special rules were being made for him. Now he had to worry about someone conjuring a scallop and chucking it in his face. Conjunction was among the most difficult magics taught at Hogwarts, though instruction began early on with conjuring fire and water. Conjuring an animal, even a simple invertebrate like a scallop, was complex. Most students didn't advance to N.E.W.T. Transfiguration for that reason. Attempting to conjure birds had made several of Harry's classmates wish to drop the class entirely. Still, it was a persistent worry Harry now had, on top of everything else he had to worry about.

When the meeting ended, Harry didn't return to the Slytherin dungeon with the other Slytherin prefects. He went to the library. It was a short walk, though Harry had to cross the entrance hall to get there. Students were still in the Great Hall, some doing homework, others socializing, still others having a late dinner. Harry knew his brother was at quidditch practice. He had memorized Monty's schedule, for his own peace of mind.

Lady Madeleine appeared from behind a statue, under which Mrs. Norris and Crookshanks were still curled up. Harry wasn't sure how communication between cats went, but he hoped Mrs. Norris was also on the lookout for any potential animagi. She was getting up in the years, though, and was loyal to Mr. Filch. Filch struck Harry as a fan of Rita Skeeter. Her sensationalist writing was likely a balm to his bitter old heart. He could see Filch reveling at another scandal tarnishing Hagrid's reputation. It was no easy task, given Hagrid had been a staple at Hogwarts for over half a century. Every single witch and wizard who had attended Hogwarts knew Hagrid. Even Rita Skeeter must have encountered him during her school days, though she certainly acted like Hagrid was some recently discovered anomaly.

Harry reached the library and immediately walked towards the Restricted Section. Madam Pince gave him a cursory look, but her attention quickly went back to the increased activity following Viktor Krum. His taking Hermione to the Yule Ball hadn't diminished the interest in him. If anything, it had spurred his fans on. If Hermione Granger, why not them?

He was tempted to ask Madam Pince for help. She was the librarian, and knew more about the Hogwarts library than even the ancient ghosts that sometimes wandered in. But Harry didn't trust anything he told a staff member to not get back to Dumbledore. Exploration into immortality wasn't exactly benign.

Harry had seen the Philosopher's Stone, in a magical mirror. A crystal the color of heart's blood. Destroyed, according to the headmaster.

“People who seek immortality are often surprised by what they find.”

There were creatures considered immortal. Phoenixes. Vampires. Ghosts. Phoenixes aged rapidly, from birth to death over the course of a year, and were rarely at full strength. Vampires could survive indefinitely on human blood, but their bodies still aged, and their interest in living in such a state diminished with time. Ghosts were the shadows of souls, frozen in time, unable to change. Sir Nicholas would always bemoan his partial decapitation, the Grey Lady would continue haunting the towers, the Bloody Baron would rattle his chains for eternity, Moaning Myrtle would always be a moping fourteen year old with spots.

Immortality had a cost, in whatever guise it assumed.

What had the Dark Lord’s immortality cost him?

Harry wanted to talk to his dad, but his dad had been in an exceptionally foul mood of late. When he wasn’t teaching, he was busy mutilating skrewts. So Harry assumed. He knew his dad was a potions prodigy, he had the proof in an old textbook, but not everything could be solved with a potion. There were potions to treat his symptoms, spells Harry could use to protect himself. That was enough.

The Restricted Section was dark, further obscuring the books it contained. Harry didn’t bother lighting a lamp until he got to his table. Lady Madeleine promptly leapt into the chair he always sat in, specifically so Harry had to pick her up to sit down. She bumped her head against his, then spent some time kneading his legs to make a more comfortable bed for herself. Harry let her, removing a letter from a pocket. He had been saving it all day, to read when he had a moment to himself. To cheer him up.

He knew Percy was in Transylvania. Percy had found time to brag about his quasi-ambassadorial mission to the Transylvanian Ministry during the Yule Ball. Harry had his misgivings, about both the International Ban on Dueling and a personal assistant being sent to negotiate on behalf of his department head. It was a significant responsibility for any personal assistant, who acted more often than not as secretaries, and more so for an eighteen year old. Harry didn’t doubt Percy’s competence, but this was the first time he would engage in any sort of negotiation. Having him do so with a department head of a foreign ministry was unorthodox, especially for a stringent man like Bartemius Crouch.

The letter had arrived via a very small, very harried owl. Harry couldn’t imagine the cost of hiring a post owl from Romania to Scotland. Percy could have waited until his work trip was over. That he hadn’t brought a blush to Harry’s cheeks.

He carefully broke the wax seal—stamped with a stylized M bisected by a wand, surrounded by stars—and took the letter out of the envelope.

May it please your Prefecthood,

It has been several days since negotiations have begun. Thus far I have been forced to make a number of concessions in the convention, in its current form. The Transylvanian Ministry is, unsurprisingly, unwilling to accept stricter conditions than the governing body that surrounds it. As it is, I have the strong impression I am being placated, like a bawling infant. My efforts are hampered by my inability to speak either Romanian, nor Hungarian, or Romani. Mr. Crouch's counterpart has kindly provided a translator, something I should have had the foresight to request from our own Ministry. However, as Mr. Crouch oft fulfills that role, I fear any such effort would have been in vain.

I regret our discussion of the sociopolitical import of dueling was forced to a premature end. Had I approached you sooner the evening of the Yule Ball, more of our time could have been spent in conversation, rather than other diversions.

Harry laid his head on the table, his face heating. Lady Madeleine meowed in annoyance, then wriggled out of his lap. It took a moment for him to regain the capacity to read.

I hope to continue our discussion on the role dueling has played in turning points throughout history in person. Its use as a tool of mediation in disputes is well-known, and has been explained to me in varying degrees of condescension over the past few days. I find myself in agreement with Mr. Zamfir, as you know. As a representative in the Ministry, I must counter such claims.

There have, however, been several elements of dueling that have been consistently overlooked in the discourse. First, the magical innovations motivated by dueling. Most famously, perhaps, was the development of the Disarming Charm...

The ban was such an obviously bad idea, and Harry found himself nodding along with Percy's words as if he were on the other side of the table. Percy avoided addressing *why* their Ministry wanted the ban. It had nothing to do with ensuring the safety of witches and wizards, preserving the Statute of Secrecy, nor reducing altercations between magical peoples of different nations. The International Ban on Dueling was another legal tool for them to use to target whoever they wanted. If someone like Lucius Malfoy was caught dueling some ruffian in Knockturn Alley, the Ministry would turn a blind eye. If a team of aurors caught a pair of residents dueling, they would arrest them. Most people wouldn't even know the law existed, nor would they care if they did.

Percy apparently had a lot of down time between meetings, as the letter was several pages long. Harry smiled to himself, idly playing with his ring, his thoughts drifting to the time he dueled with the Head Boy.

To my astonishment, I discovered a muggle skatepark upon my arrival. It occurred to me that such a location may be of interest. I had not realized it was an activity outside of Britain. My thoughts immediately went to you. I have returned to the park several times and have yet to see any demonstration of skill equal to yours. It is my fervent belief that if the signatories of the ban witnessed you dueling, the ban would be doomed.

Yours,

Percival Septimus Weasley

Personal Assistant of Mr. Bartemius Crouch Sr

Department of International Magical Cooperation

British Ministry of Magic

It had taken all week, but Mr. Zamfir had finally agreed to present the proposed dueling ban to the Transylvanian Minister. Percy was not pleased with the result, though it was better than he could have hoped for. He had almost exhausted all of his arguments; most of his time had been spent holed up in a muggle hotel room, trying to think of something to convince a man who was more preoccupied with the movements of vampires across his nation's border.

As it was Percy's last day in Transylvania, he had the idea to do some sightseeing. He visited Calea Vrajitoarelor, the magical shopping district in Cluj-Napoca. It was a single broad street, hidden between two muggle roads.

Percy walked through the crowd, feeling less out of place in his simple green robes than he had before Mr. Zamfir, in his intimidating, heavily embroidered garments. It was not so dissimilar to Diagon Alley, with bookshops, apothecaries, a local wandmaker, a Gringotts' branch. Among these familiar sights was a cart where an elderly man brewed coffee in hot sand,. Another stand had balls of spiced ground meat grilling over a sparkling blue fire.

The smell of garlic was so strong it made Percy's eyes water. The message was clear; vampires were not welcome. He walked by an elderly woman sitting on a flying carpet, offering vials of silver fluid that made Percy nervous. Two dhampir, who stood out from the crossbows and stakes they carried, and for the ethereal beauty which marked them as not fully human, stopped to speak with the woman.

Slightly hungry, and eager to try more local cuisine, Percy followed the smell of fried dough and found a stall where doughnuts were being prepared. The sign read *Papanași*, though Percy didn't know enough Romanian to tell if it was the name of the establishment or the food they served.

There was already someone waiting for their confection, a stocky wizard in heavy dragonhide boots and jacket, with a bright yellow knit cap at odds with the rest of his outfit.

Percy recognized that hat. He had seen his mother knitting it. He tried turning away, but it was too late.

"Percy?" Charlie said.

Percy sighed, turning back to see his older brother smiling at him. People were rarely happy to see Percy.

"What are you doing here?" Charlie asked, walking towards him. "I didn't know you were in Romania! Why did you tell me?"

"I was here for work," Percy said. "I will be leaving tomorrow."

Charlie's face fell. The woman who operated the doughnut stand called out to him. Charlie hurried back to receive a tray containing a doughnut, covered in sour cream and blueberry jam.

"Did you want to get something?" Charlie asked, smiling encouragingly. "I mean, we can go to a muggle place if you'd like. Sit down for a bit."

Percy had no idea what to do. What he wanted to do. He knew the Romanian Dragon Sanctuary, under the purview of the Romanian Ministry, was located in the Carpathian Mountains. He knew his brother would have dropped everything to meet with him. He knew Charlie likely felt hurt. Percy could see it on his face.

"I was hoping to purchase a souvenir for mother," Percy said.

"We can do that," Charlie said quickly. "I'll help you out. They've got great dirigible plum wine here! I'm just picking up some supplies for the sanctuary that don't owl well. I've got plenty of time. Are you sure you don't want a *papanași*? I always get one when I'm here. They're really good. I'll pay for it."

Percy's heart sank. Charlie was always so nice, always willing to lend a hand, so quick to forgive. He was a better brother than Percy ever could be. "If you insist."

Charlie laughed, then turned to chat to the doughnut woman in Romanian. It only made sense for Charlie to have learned some, having lived there for nearly four years.

Percy soon found himself seated at an outdoor table, watching as Charlie nearly slipped on the icy street as he hurried through the crowd with two cups of coffee.

“Ministry business, eh?” Charlie said, producing a fork and offering it to Percy. “Are you okay to eat this stuff? I remembered what you said about how expensive—”

“It’s fine,” Percy said. “I would prefer not to discuss that.”

Charlie nodded. “Alright. So, how about that Evans kid? How’s he doing? I was worried about whoever got the Horntail, but I *never* expected to see something like that!”

Percy frowned. “I’d rather not discuss that either.”

Charlie rolled his eyes, smiling indulgently. “Fine. No health stuff, no boys. Got it. You said you’re here for work? I hope *that’s* not off-limits.”

“It’s classified information,” Percy said flatly, amused by his brother’s exasperation. “I was in meetings with the Transylvanian Head of Magical Cooperation, regarding the International Ban on Dueling.”

“The what?” Charlie said, cutting into his doughnut. “Why would they ban dueling?”

Percy smiled faintly, then began his pitch.

Paparazzi

Chapter Summary

January 1995

Chapter Notes

Paparazzi sadly does not rhyme with papanaşi (papa-nosh)

Also, Roger Davies' last name sounds like "Davis." It's Welsh.

“He must’ve worked out the egg,” Monty said, watching as Viktor Krum swam towards the middle of the Black Lake. The weather had warmed slightly over the past week, melting the snow on the grounds and the ice over the lake.

“Monty,” Hermione began nervously. “Are you sure you’re ready for the Second Task? I mean, it looks like Viktor—”

Ron snorted, and Hermione’s mouth snapped shut. Monty wasn’t entirely hopeless when it came to observing his friends. He’d cottoned on to Harry fancying Percy, and he’d noticed Percy sneaking out of the Yule Ball after Harry had left, so it was mutual there. Based on the row Ron had with Hermione for her being Krum’s date to the ball, and the broken Viktor Krum figurine parts littering their dormitory shortly after, Monty suspected Ron fancied Hermione. And if he knew, Hermione must’ve known as well. Both Hermione and Ron had chosen not to address it, and both were pretending the Yule Ball had never happened. It made being around the two of them at the same time extremely awkward. Monty had hoped visiting Hogsmeade, just the three of them, would help things get back to normal.

So far, it wasn’t working out. They hadn't even got through the gates.

They trooped across the wet grounds, the scraggly grass churned to mud by other students going to Hogsmeade. They had a vague plan of locating Hagrid, which Monty wasn’t keen on. He was fond of the man, since he’d got him off that rock the Dursleys had dragged him to, and shown him around Diagon Alley. And Hagrid had always been kind to Monty, inviting him round for tea, sending Christmas presents, stopping for a chat. Monty had never had a bad word to say about Hagrid, though sometimes he wished he’d had a more thorough introduction to the magical world. Someone like Harry, who wouldn’t have paraded through the Leaky Cauldron or left him at Madam Malkin’s for a pint. Maybe not Harry, that was a

little too unrealistic given they'd only met on the train. But Professor McGonagall would have been nice.

Hermione and Ron liked Hagrid too, though Monty suspected Ron saw Hagrid as more of someone to get a good laugh out of, and Hermione seemed to take pity on Hagrid, and looked down on him. However, both had changed slightly since it had come out Hagrid was a half-giant. Ron had heard stories of how awful and dangerous giants were his entire life, though Monty hoped he didn't think Hagrid was like that. Hagrid wouldn't hurt a fly. He'd probably crossbreed it with a kraken, but he wouldn't hurt it. Hermione hadn't known much about giants, but Monty had seen her in the library—with Krum no less—reading about giants with a look of concern.

It made Monty worry what Ron and Hermione would think of Remus being a werewolf.

Once they were walking down the high street of Hogsmeade, Krum doing laps around the lake was forgotten. Honeydukes was always a great distraction, and they were having a sale on what Christmas sweets and chocolates they hadn't sold for the holiday. While Hermione tried to dislodge a gobstopper from Ron's throat, Monty spotted Harry through the window. He was walking by with two of his friends, the girls who weren't on the quidditch team. With the Slytherin and Ravenclaw game that evening, Monty knew their captain would have the team training like mad.

Monty hadn't seen much of Harry since the Yule Ball, not that he'd spoken to him since Harry had shared his suspicion that Rita Skeeter was an animagus. Monty had already seen the damage she had done, exposing a secret of Harry's that threatened his life. Skeeter didn't seem to care about the consequences of her articles. She probably enjoyed the chaos she caused. Monty was positive she had got the details about Harry's allergy from Hagrid. Hermione didn't see what the issue was, and Ron didn't care. It put Monty on edge, though, seeing how easy it was for Skeeter to get private information. What if she targeted Harry? What else would she find? And what if she saw them talking to each other? Or worse, training together? Most of the Slytherins hated Monty. How would they treat Harry if it got out they were friends?

So, while Hermione and Ron wanted to talk Hagrid out of whatever slump he was in, Monty was ambivalent. That Hagrid still had a job was a miracle, in his opinion, and he didn't mind if Hagrid missed meals in the Great Hall. How would it make Harry feel to see Hagrid there? It wasn't fair to Harry.

Hagrid wasn't in any of the shops they visited, and Monty hadn't expected he would be. Hagrid only seemed to visit the Three Broomsticks, which was where most people ended up when visiting Hogsmeade. Monty had gone to the Hog's Head with Harry before, but Harry had mentioned in passing that Dumbledore's brother owned the place. Monty hadn't known Dumbledore had a brother, but he knew very little about the headmaster. It was still strange.

His pockets laden with his purchases from the day, Monty stepped into the Three Broomsticks. It was crowded as usual, but there was no sign of Hagrid. Feeling a little relieved, Monty went to the bar with his friends to order butterbeers. His relief was short-lived, as Monty was soon accosted by Ludo Bagman.

“Mind if we have a word, Monty?” Bagman said, not waiting for a response before hurrying to the other end of the bar. Monty shrugged and followed him, leaving Hermione and Ron to collect their drinks.

Bagman wiped his brow with a yellow and black striped handkerchief. “It’s been a nightmare dealing with the goblins, I tell you! Not a word of English between them.”

Monty looked around the pub, but Bagman grabbed his shoulder and nodded to the mirror behind the bar. In one corner sat a group of goblins, staring at him and Bagman. Mostly Bagman, Monty hoped.

“They only speak Gobbledegook,” Bagman said, tucking his sodden handkerchief away. “Not the prettiest language, I’ve got to say, but easier on the ears than Mermish!”

“Mermish?” Monty asked.

“Sounds a bit like wailing,” Bagman said. “Like a kneazle in heat. Absolutely wretched, unless you’re in the water. Then they sing like sirens. Beautiful stuff. Fascinating culture, merpeople.”

“Right,” Monty said slowly. “Is this what you wanted to talk to me about? Only, I’m with my friends.”

“Ah, well,” Bagman said, moving closer to Monty. He smelled like stale beer. “How are you getting on with your egg?”

“I think I’ve cracked it,” Monty said. Did Bagman think he was an idiot?

Bagman laughed, clapping Monty’s shoulder. “If you need any help, anything at all, don’t hesitate. We all feel just awful you’ve been thrown into this tournament. I’d be happy to give you a leg up.”

“I’ve got it handled, thanks,” Monty said flatly. “Have you offered Harry any help?”

Bagman pulled back, glancing to the side. Monty followed his gaze, and saw Harry at a table with his two friends, Rookwood and Alderton. “I think he’d garotte me if I tried.”

Monty almost laughed, but he was uneasy that Bagman was offering to help him a second time. What was he playing at?

Harry watched Ludo Bagman from under his eyelashes. The man scurried out of the Three Broomsticks, looking nervously over his shoulder.

“What do you think he was talking to Potter about?” Phoebe whispered. Unnecessarily, as Harry had cast a silencing charm as soon as they sat down.

“Hedging his bets, I reckon,” Harry said, taking a sip from his butterbeer. It was too sweet, and made his stomach ache. “I heard he lost a lot of money at the Quidditch World Cup.”

“Did he?” Jasmine said, tracing the rim of her gillywater with a finger. It was a pale gold cordial that smelled strongly of liquorice, an odd result given it was brewed with gillyweed. Harry knew his dad had gillyweed in his private stores. It was an option, but it would still mean Monty had to swim through the Black Lake.

“He *was* speaking to goblins,” Phoebe whispered, glancing at the goblins. Harry took another sip, watching as his brother joined Hermione and Ron at a table. If Bagman was placing bets on the Triwizard Tournament, there wasn’t much Harry could do. If Bagman actually helped his brother, that was fine by him. There was a definite conflict of interest, but the Ministry wouldn’t care about that.

Percy would.

Harry suppressed a sigh. Going to Hogsmeade felt like a waste of time, but Jasmine and Phoebe had insisted on getting him out of the castle. He didn’t need time away from the castle. The castle was where all the books were. Tomes and Scrolls didn’t carry books on soul magic. Harry didn’t even know enough to say what type of magic it was. Something to do with death, whatever death was.

“Oh, come on,” Jasmine muttered.

Harry looked away from the wall he hadn’t realized he had been staring at and saw Rita Skeeter saunter into the Three Broomsticks. She was followed by her loyal, weak stomached photographer.

“She looks like a slug,” Phoebe said, wrinkling her nose delicately at Skeeter’s yellow robes.

Harry watched anxiously as Skeeter made her way through the pub, directly towards his brother. Thankfully, she hadn’t seen Monty yet. She was too busy talking to her lackey.

“Shit,” Harry muttered, reaching into his robes. He pulled his wand out, kept it hidden under their table, then pointed at where Fred and George were sitting with Lee Jordan.

The bottle Fred held exploded in his hand, covering all three with butterbeer. Everyone in the pub turned to look, some shouting in surprise and alarm, others standing to see what the commotion was. The twins, dripping and confused. Lee. Jasmine and Phoebe. Madam Rosmerta. Monty.

Rita Skeeter.

For a second, just as Skeeter looked over her shoulder, her cold, blue eyes met Harry’s. It was all he needed.

“*Legilimens*,” Harry breathed.

He had to be quick, quicker than a thought. Harry had only practiced with his dad, and hadn’t had the chance to do so since the school year began. He had, nevertheless, been studying

Legilimency since third year, and he had tested his skills against a master occlumens, someone who could lie to Albus Dumbledore.

Skeeter's thoughts came in brief flashes. Ludo Bagman, Harry didn't care about, and it was unfortunate he hadn't time to engineer Skeeter into thinking about what he *did* want to know. Delving into her thoughts made Harry's skin crawl. He already knew Skeeter was not a nice person. Buying Hagrid pint after pint. Following him to his cabin, into the Forbidden Forest. The skrewts. Questioning why the skrewts were hidden so deep in the forest. Careless talk cost lives. Hagrid forgot, but Skeeter remembered.

For a moment, he experienced with her the feeling of transformation, shrinking smaller and smaller, her vision fracturing into a pattern of light and dark dots, blurring, two appendages twitching, sensing heat, wind, too many legs, back splitting, lifting.

Harry pulled away, watching as Skeeter kept turning towards the fuss caused by the exploding bottle, stumbling slightly at the abruptness of her mind being ransacked. She was an insect animagus. A beetle.

Disgusted, Harry kept his wand trained on Skeeter. He doubted she knew what had just happened, but he wouldn't allow her to remember.

Skeeter needed to forget. Forget something big.

"Obliviate."

Monty gawked as Rita Skeeter collapsed in a dead faint. Madam Rosmerta was already running around the bar, drawn by the exploding butterbeer bottle. It had to be another one of Fred and George's pranks, as they and Lee had started laughing, until Skeeter slammed into the floor next to them, taking her photographer down with her.

Monty stood up to see better, while Madam Rosmerta began shouting at the twins to get out. The photographer struggled upright, gave his broken camera a devastated look, then gasped when he saw Skeeter. He shook her shoulder, and Monty heard her groan.

"What happened?" Ron asked, looking away from where the twins were being shoved out of the door, loudly claiming they hadn't done anything. "Do you think the bottle got her?"

"Maybe," Monty said. Skeeter pushed herself up, one hand grabbing her head. "She must've hit something on the way down. Serves her right, after everything she's done."

"It looks like she got really hurt," Hermione said, not sounding very worried.

"Who cares?" Ron said. Madam Rosmerta had kicked Lee out too, and hurried back to help Skeeter sit up. Skeeter shook her head, then used her photographer to stand upright. She waved Madam Rosmerta off and shambled to a table.

“Let’s just finish our drinks and go,” Hermione said. “I don’t want to be in here with that woman.”

“Alright,” Monty said, sitting back down. He had been about to give Skeeter a piece of his mind, he had felt so furious at seeing her. Watching her trip and fall had distracted him, and now he just wanted to get away from her. Skeeter’s fall seemed to have dazed her, and her hand shook as she picked up the tumbler of firewhiskey Madam Rosmerta set in front of her.

Monty quietly finished his butterbeer, not wanting to say anything where Skeeter might overhear. He snuck a glance at Harry’s table, where his friends were huddled together, talking quietly. Harry had put up a silencing charm, which seemed like a habit for the older boy. Hermione always complained whenever Monty tried one in the library, or demanded to know what spell he had used. It was a spell Harry had taught him, and not one he wanted to share.

They made it out of the Three Broomsticks without getting Skeeter’s attention, then walked back to Hogwarts. Monty was glad neither Hermione nor Ron brought up visiting Hagrid. Seeing Skeeter had rekindled his anger, and Monty didn’t think he’d be able to treat Hagrid civilly. Had he even apologized to Harry?

Monty didn’t have occasion to think about Hagrid again until dinner. He was at the Gryffindor table, helping both Luna and Neville with their Defense homework. It was easy, because Luna was a year below and Monty already knew the material, and with Neville they were in the same class, and he’d already finished his essay on the effects of the Cruciatus Curse. It was a difficult assignment for Neville, and Hermione’s attempts to offer advice weren’t helping. She didn’t know what had happened to Neville’s parents. Monty thought talking to Remus about Neville getting a different assignment was a good idea, but Neville was determined to get through it.

“Look, it’s Hagrid,” Ron said.

Monty looked up from Neville’s parchment to see Hagrid walking into the Great Hall. The headmaster was at his side, chatting amicably to him. They passed the Gryffindor table, and Hagrid waved sheepishly at them. Monty simply stared, wondering what the hell was going on.

“Professor Dumbledore must have gone to talk to him,” Hermione said.

“No shit,” Monty said, watching them walk to the head table. He glanced at the Slytherin table, but Harry was hidden from view. There was no chance he missed Hagrid walking in. Looking back at the man, Monty saw that the headmaster sat him on the side opposite Snape. Snape was staring straight ahead, a look of pure hatred on his face. Monty remembered that face, from his very first potions lesson. Monty had thought Snape hated Remus the most. He was happy enough to let Monty take his Wolfsbane to him, and seemed to resent having to brew it. Monty wasn’t sure if it was because Remus was a werewolf, or because Remus had been friends with his dad. Now he wasn’t sure if Snape hated Hagrid because he was a half-giant, or because he’d told Skeeter about Harry’s allergy.

Whatever the cause, the atmosphere in the Great Hall became tense. Many of the Gryffindors were happy to see Hagrid again, and some people from other houses. Luna had gone strangely quiet, abandoning her quill. The Slytherin table had gone quieter still. In defense of Harry, for hatred of giants, both, Monty couldn't say. Even the reactions of the professors were varied. Some were upset, some welcomed Hagrid, others ignored him.

Whatever people thought of the headmaster having Hagrid join them for dinner, the headmaster was showing them all he was standing by Hagrid. And, in Monty's mind, that meant standing against Harry.

Harry sat in the Slytherin stands, penned in by Jasmine and Phoebe, trying to remember how he was supposed to act. Phoebe pressed something into his hand, and Harry put it in his mouth without thinking. It was a toffee. Harry liked toffees, though he could barely taste it, and it was rock hard from the cold weather.

He appreciated the position the headmaster was in. If he repudiated Hagrid, people would see it as for him being part giant, not for him broadcasting Harry's allergy for their entire world to know. But overtly showing support was, in a sense, condoning his behavior. That was what it felt like to Harry, that the theater of supporting people who weren't entirely human was more important than his life. That Hagrid's feelings were more important than his life.

The game had started after dinner. Not an ideal time for quidditch, after sunset, but Astrid hadn't been put off. Knowing the time of the game, she had taken to asking Harry to use arithmancy to predict where bludgers would end up, which Harry told her couldn't be done. Quidditch had been popular for centuries, and if anyone had come up with a way to know where bludgers were at all times, either the work had been erased from history, or the quidditch-loving arithmancers of yore had given up. Harry had enough going on without helping Astrid revolutionize quidditch strategy.

The toffee slowly softened in his mouth, got stuck in his teeth. It wasn't a Ton-Tongue Toffee; the incident with Draco Malfoy had put most the school off toffees, and despite his efforts Harry knew a few were still floating around.

He avoided looking at the professor's stand, where his dad was. He had been compelled to leave the dungeons to watch Slytherin destroy Ravenclaw. The match was incredibly uneven. Roger Davies, team captain and lead chaser, had spent the day in Hogsmeade trailing Fleur Delacour around. He wasn't in any state of mind to captain his team, who desperately needed captaining. Cho Chang had spent the day with Cedric Diggory, lost in the pretty boy miasma Cedric oozed, and followed Terence around like a lost lamb. It was the most annoying thing Harry had ever seen. Uninspired, boring quidditch, which was saying a lot given it was quidditch.

"I hope this bloody game ends soon," he muttered, watching as Adrian scored another goal.

“Slytherin still in the lead,” Lee Jordan said, “Ninety points to zero. And...no, never mind. Davies does *not* get the quaffle. I would like to take this opportunity to address any Hogsmeade pub owners listening in. I had nothing to do with—”

“Jordan!” McGonagall shouted. “Last warning!”

“Sorry, professor,” Lee said insincerely. “And that’s another goal for Slytherin, courtesy of Chaser Paddington. One hundred to zero, Slytherin...”

Harry was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Jasmine and Phoebe had been right next to him. Distracted by Skeeter entering the Three Broomsticks, her loud yellow robes, the bottle exploding. He had acted without thinking. He had been fast, quiet. No one suspected anything. Skeeter wouldn’t even remember. He had made sure of it. He had worried that perhaps the Obliviation had been too significant, but he had patiently waited, ordered more drinks, kept an eye on Skeeter as she sipped shots of firewhiskey and grumbled to her photographer about Lockhart, about her next scoop.

His dad would think he had been a careless idiot if he knew. Performing legilimency in a crowded pub, on a high profile person, obviating her in front of a crowd. It was only luck she had tripped and fallen, cracking her head on the ground. Pure, stupid, uncontrollable luck. The Obliviation likely would not have worked had he not destabilized Skeeter’s thoughts with Legilimency. She was too strong minded, her mind a steel trap for salacious little tidbits. Harry let her have those. She had something more valuable to lose, and it was well worth the price of what she had cost him.

Harry wrapped his arms around himself, smiling with grim satisfaction as Terence caught the snitch.

He had seen his opportunity, and he had taken it.

He had made Skeeter forget she was an animagus.

Sins of the Father

Chapter Summary

February 1995

Severus stalked between the tables, a dignified stalk which took him around the lab in an evenly paced circuit. He had noticed his son had become more withdrawn of late, a trend which had begun as of Potter's name spewing forth from that blasted goblet. He had thought the matter of the Killing Curse, his son's desire to perform it in some half-witted parody of the Dark Lord's bodily destruction, had been laid to rest. His son, however, took after him more than Severus cared to admit. When Harry set his mind to something, he was not one to be diverted. The boy was obsessed with discovering the secret to his brother's survival.

That day, Severus had assigned the sixth-year N.E.W.T. students the Elixir to Induce Euphoria, several months before he had intended to introduce it. It was a potion well within Harry's capabilities, though Severus could tell at a glance that most students had botched the potion so thoroughly it would instead induce hysteria.

He paused beside Harry's cauldron, glancing at the bright yellow potion that practically shone out of the cauldron. Rainbows flashed across the surface, the true indicator of a successful brew. Severus gave an experimental sniff, then frowned. Harry had neglected to add peppermint. It was not a typical addition to the potion, but one Severus had discovered himself at Harry's age, one which he was certain he had made note of in his old copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*.

"What is this?" he asked in a low voice, one which made every student in the room freeze.

"An Elixir to Induce Euphoria, sir," Harry said quietly, the bouncing rainbows produced by the potion casting prismatic lights on his pallid face. Severus noted the dark shadows under his son's eyes. The boy wasn't sleeping.

"And is this the best you can do, Mr. Evans?" Severus asked. He saw a sprig of peppermint on the table. Harry had intentionally left the ingredient out. The boy had developed an aversion to mint. Harry had only mentioned his growing dislike of the flavor once, several years prior. It seemed to have become worse since then, if he was refusing to use mint in potions he wasn't required to imbibe.

"No, sir," Harry admitted, still not looking at him. Severus glanced at the black ring his son had taken to wearing. Severus had a good idea where it had come from, considering it had only appeared after the Yule Ball. After Weasley had chased after his sixteen-year-old son.

“Stay after class,” Severus said. Harry winced as if he’d been shouted at. “For wasting time on this drek.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said.

Severus continued his circuit, ignoring the hushed commiserations from the other Slytherin students. Rookwood was very exacting in her brewing, following instructions to the letter. Pucey was more willing to experiment, push boundaries, though the boy was distracted. He kept stroking the patchy beard he was attempting to grow. Severus’ students did a number of embarrassing things, and he had long learned to block out their grooming habits, or lack thereof. Entering the dormitories felt like being buried in a midden, when the house-elves hadn’t a chance to sterilize the place.

Harry bottled his potion, watching the swirling, shining liquid indifferently, then began methodically cleaning his table. There wasn’t anything overtly wrong, though Severus doubted anyone who didn’t know his son well would notice the difference in his behavior. A quiet boy who became quieter was nothing of note. Or perhaps they assigned his mood to the impending Second Task. No doubt they expected another show, at his son’s expense.

When all the students had turned in their work for the day, and the door clicked shut behind Rookwood and Pucey, Severus motioned for Harry to join him in his office.

Severus had not spent much time with his son since Halloween. He had seen Potter more than Harry, with Potter taking Lupin’s potion to him every night the week preceding the full moon, and peppering him with questions about potions. The increased scrutiny due to the Triwizard Tournament, Skeeter popping up left and right, Severus’ own experimentation, had led to Harry only approaching him when he was desperate. It had occurred one time, and Severus had been unable to provide Harry with the answers he sought.

Severus took a seat behind his desk. Harry continued to stand, his arms crossed, his eyes downcast. Severus took out his wand, watching Harry’s posture ease as he ensured their privacy as best he could.

“Why did you not add the peppermint?” Severus asked, setting his wand down.

“I didn’t feel like it,” Harry said, in an empty sort of voice that put Severus on edge.

“Have you continued your research into the Killing Curse?”

“No,” Harry said.

Severus frowned. “Then what have you been doing in the library?”

“Homework,” Harry said. “Writing letters to Percy. Looking into soul magic.”

Severus’ back stiffened.

“The library doesn’t have any books on it,” Harry continued, closing his eyes.

“They have been removed,” Severus said. “The headmaster keeps such books in his office.”

Harry nodded.

“You will not break into Dumbledore’s office,” Severus said, on the verge of forbidding Harry to learn anything about such magic. He doubted his son would heed him, and Severus suddenly found his own ignorance of soul magic a horrendous oversight. “I cannot impress upon you strongly enough how foolish such a thing would be.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Harry said, and Severus could not tell if it was a lie. “I’ve found out what sort of animagus Skeeter is, by the way.”

It was such a perfunctory way of changing topics, and it unnerved Severus further. “How?”

“She’s a beetle,” Harry said. “I don’t know what kind.”

“If you have seen her transform, how could you not identify her?” Severus asked, his concern growing.

“I legilimized her,” Harry said bluntly. “In the Three Broomsticks.”

Severus stared at his son.

“I already know what you’re going to say,” Harry said blankly, staring at the floor. “It was stupid. It was risky. Don’t worry, I obliviated her.”

Severus went very still.

“I took her memories of being an animagus, too,” Harry said.

Severus closed his eyes, not wanting to lash out at Harry for such reckless behavior. The publication of Harry’s allergy—one of his allergies—had infuriated Severus. He could only guess how it had impacted his son. He could only guess, as he had not discussed it with Harry at all.

“Did you stop to think of the consequences?” Severus asked. “Did it ever occur to you what sort of gaps that would leave in her memory? What actions she might take to reconcile them? That she would associate such an absence with encountering you?”

“In the moment, no,” Harry said.

Severus laced his fingers together, trying to remain calm. He could find Skeeter himself, supply the woman with rationalizations for the Swiss cheese her brain had undoubtedly become.

“It was only a second of eye contact,” Harry said, finally looking up at him. “I didn’t have time to be gentle, or subtle. I had to force the memories I wanted to the surface. Then I had to make her forget *that*. I only took a little more.”

“A little more,” Severus repeated, gripping his hands together. “And what if it is known to others she is an animagus? Perhaps the *Daily Prophet* relies on that ability of hers.”

Harry was silent. He looked dead on his feet. It had been two weeks since that Hogsmeade weekend. Two weeks in which Harry had withheld his actions. Two weeks in which he had not approached Severus for help.

“Suppose she goes to St. Mungo’s,” he continued, keeping his voice level. It was a struggle. “And the obliviation is discovered. Will it not be traced to her visit to the Three Broomsticks? This creates more problems that it solves, if it solves anything at all.”

“Who would she tell?” Harry asked. “I don’t think anyone knows she’s an animagus, I would have seen that in her memories. And she would have to admit to spying on people. If the *Daily Prophet* knows, do you think they’d go to the aurors about it? The same thing would happen.”

“Post hoc justifications,” Severus said.

“I told you,” Harry said, some feeling entering his voice, “I didn’t have time to think it through.”

“You let your emotions get the better of you,” Severus said.

Harry gave him an unimpressed look. “If you’re done lecturing me, can I go to dinner? I already know I fucked up. I’ve been worrying about it ever since. Like I need anything else to worry about,” he added in a mumble.

“You are not dismissed,” Severus said firmly. “Sit down.”

Harry walked closer to his desk and sat down, his face blanking.

“Why?” Severus asked.

“Because Skeeter’s a piece of shit,” Harry said. “Because of everything she’s written about Monty. Because I saw her walking towards my brother with her stupid photographer. His name’s Bozo, by the way.”

“Did you obliviate him too?” Severus asked pointedly.

“No,” Harry said. “Should I have done?”

“It would have been prudent,” Severus said. “If as ill-advised as this entire venture of yours.”

“It’s not a *venture*,” Harry said, frowning slightly. “It was a crime of opportunity.”

Severus released the death grip on his hands to pinch his nose. He could understand Harry’s thought process. Harry suspected Skeeter was an animagus, Skeeter had been causing him a great deal of annoyance, if not outright danger to him and his brother, he had tools at hand to acquire the information he wanted, and to divest Skeeter of a valuable weapon. Unlike Severus, Harry wasn’t exchanging curses in the corridors and wrecking havoc with his *little Death Eater friends*. Harry had been more subtle in exacting his revenge, but he was still a teenager. Still a child who had far too much he was trying to control.

“I will deal with Skeeter,” Severus decided.

“What?” Harry asked, sounding surprised.

“If something like this happens again,” Severus said, “come to me immediately.”

“You’re busy,” Harry said. “I can handle it.”

“That remains to be seen,” Severus said, already dreading the mess he would have to clean up. He didn’t doubt his son’s capabilities, but he was still a novice in the mind arts. Severus had far more experience in memory modification and manipulation. Skills he had not needed for over a decade, kept fine-tuned, awaiting the Dark Lord’s return. “And I am not too busy for you.”

He looked at Harry again, and saw his son was biting his lip. “Why don’t you care more about what’s going on with Monty?”

Severus sat back. The entire reason he was at Hogwarts was *for* Monty Potter. But how could Harry know that? How could he know, without Severus revealing his role in the murder of his son’s mother?

“That boy has a surfeit of people who care for him,” Severus said. “I trust the headmaster—”

“I don’t,” Harry said.

Severus stared at Harry, who grimaced but said nothing more.

“He is not infallible,” Severus admitted. “But he is nevertheless one of the greatest wizards of our time.”

“That doesn’t mean anything to me,” Harry said.

“It should,” Severus said. “Dumbledore is the one, above all, who the Dark Lord feared. Fears. You are sixteen. The Dark Lord had *decades* to develop whatever magic ensured his survival after that night. You cannot hope to replicate it during free periods!”

Harry flinched, then drew his legs up and wrapped his arms around them. Severus had no idea how he could sit like that.

“Maybe not,” Harry said. “Not much I can do if the headmaster’s filched all the books, is there?”

Soul magic. Harry had been touched by it at an early age, barely three years old. The diary, the diadem, the Dark Lord’s wraith. It was all so outside of Severus’ experience with magic. Even the headmaster seemed puzzled by it, resorting to the destruction of the objects. Black magic. Death magic. Was it any wonder his son was drawn to it?

“You should be focusing on the Second Task,” Severus said. “If you would like to discuss your progress on that, I am willing to listen.”

A shadow of a smile crossed Harry's face, then vanished just as quickly. "Thanks for being *willing to listen*. There's no progress to be made. I know what's in the Black Lake. I've got a plan for Monty. The only thing I'm stuck on is how to, I don't know, broadcast it? How to make it so everyone can see what's going on."

Severus narrowed his eyes at the ring Harry wore. The Weasley was impertinent. "I cannot fathom why you would assume such a burden."

Harry pressed his face into his knees, not quickly enough to hide his blush. Severus relaxed slightly, even as he abhorred the sight of his son *blushing* over Percy Weasley. At least Harry was expressing some emotion, letting his shields down.

"I learned about something that could work," Harry mumbled, still hiding his face. "I wonder if he's put it together yet?"

The decor was very brown.

Percy had passed a statue of a terrifying clown with a garish red mouth, wearing a yellow jumpsuit, before entering the establishment. Upon seeing that, he should have insisted they eat elsewhere, but his father was determined to have an authentic muggle fast food experience.

The tiles were brown. The tables were also brown, and made of no wood Percy had seen before. A sign strung on a chain helpfully informed him the restaurant was divided into two sections, smoking and nonsmoking, as though the persistent nicotine haze had not made that apparent. People sat on stools shaped like hamburgers with bulging eyes. A child spun around, shrieking in delight. The other benches and chairs were upholstered in some shiny material, and were also brown. People ashed their cigarettes into brown glass ashtrays, proudly emblazoned with a yellow letter M. The walls, Percy imagined, had once been a neutral color, but had also been stained brown from all of the smoke. A grainy television was mounted in one corner, capturing the attention of most of the muggles.

His father coughed, then beamed around at all the muggles. "What's this place called again?"

"McDonald's," Percy said.

"Wonder if there's any relation to the Macdonalds?" his father said. "Well, best join the queue!"

Percy sighed, following his father to a simple maze constructed of rope, to better guide the muggles to the cash registers. He looked up at the menu as his father weighed the rope in his hand, muttering to himself. Every item was less than a pound. It was cheap, for premade muggle food. They could probably get one of everything for two galleons, though he could

not conceive of eating so much. And, as experience had taught him, muggle food did not keep as well as magical food. It lost its structural integrity.

The queue moved quickly. It was dinner time, and Percy's father had absconded with him. He was under strict orders not to tell his mother. Percy gazed at a statue of a rotund purple fellow, contemplating explaining such a thing to his mother.

A register opened, and his father marched right up to a surly young woman in a red and white striped shirt, who was chewing gum.

"Hello!" his father exclaimed. "Tell me, what is a Big Mac?"

The girl snapped her gum, giving Percy's father a flat look. "It's big, innit?"

Percy cleared his throat, drawing her attention. "Please excuse my father, it's his first time. May we please have two Big Mac Meals?" It was cheaper than getting the items individually.

The gum snapped again, and the girl began twirling a lock of hair around a finger. "Would you like to Super Size that?"

"Ooh, what's that?" his father asked excitedly.

"Yes," Percy said. "For the fizzy drinks," he continued, hoping he had the term right, "we will both have a Coca-Cola."

"Brill," the girl said, jabbing the buttons on her register.

"What is a Chicken McNugget?" his dad said, squinting up at the menu. It glowed a dull yellow.

"An order of Chicken McNuggets as well," Percy said. The girl rolled her eyes and hit the buttons more aggressively.

"I could do for a Happy Meal," his father said musingly.

"I believe that is for children," Percy said. He glanced at a menu, and saw the Happy Meal came with a toy. "Apologies, but we will have a Happy Meal as well."

After some more tapping, the girl finally said, "Nine quid twenty."

"Splendid," his father said, fishing around the pockets of the baggy jeans he had worn for the occasion. "What's a quid?"

Percy was already prepared. He presented the disgruntled employee with a ten pound note. It was more than he had expected to spend, but worth placating his father. A receipt emerged from the cash register, and the girl presented it to him along with four silver coins.

"We'll call your number when it's ready," she drawled.

His father turned to smile at him, rubbing his hands together. “Can’t wait to see what they come up with!”

“This way, father,” Percy said, nodding to the girl, who was impatiently waiting for them to make way for the next customer. “We need to find a seat.” He eyed the hamburger stools, then walked in the opposite direction.

Percy located a booth adjacent to the smoking section, which seemed to amuse his father. He even asked one gentleman for a cigarette, which the elderly man grumbled about but handed over before resuming his perusal of the television.

“Fascinating,” his father said, examining the cigarette. “What’s that?”

Percy looked to where his father was pointing. The television was displaying an ongoing football game. Manchester United versus Aston Villa. Text scrolled along the bottom of the screen, letting the viewers know the game was being broadcast live.

Protean charms. Muggle artifacts.

A ragged cheer rose up when one of the players in a red shirt kicked a ball into a net. An employee shouted out a number. Percy checked their receipt, and found their number was next up. When it was called, Percy let his father collect the trays. He watched his father present the receipt to another employee with great aplomb, bow as he accepted the two brown trays, and stride back as if he carried a treasure of immeasurable value.

Only deep affection for his father enabled Percy's survival of such a production.

“They really *are* fast,” his father said to the room. He was easily impressed.

His father slid back into his bench, and went for the most ostentatious item on the tray. It was the Happy Meal in its bright, clown-mouth red box. His father pulled out a plastic toy, a blue creature embedded in plastic orange flames.

“Father,” Percy asked, watching as his father clicked the toy together. He pressed a button, and the blue creature shot across the table. “What do you know of Protean charms?”

Charm Offensive

Chapter Summary

February 1995

“The Drought Charm,” Professor Flitwick said, lecturing from his wobbly stack of books, “is generally considered a type of cleaning charm. In fact, many of your parents may have used it after a particularly eventful bath!”

Professor Flitwick laughed to himself, then did an awkward turn on his books to write the incantation on the blackboard. *Siccescentem*. Harry dipped his quill into his inkwell, tapped off the excess ink, and carefully added the word to his notes.

“It is, in essence, making something wet into something that is dry,” Flitwick continued. “There has been very colorful debate regarding the quality of wetness...”

Harry was in the unenviable position of sitting in front of Fred Weasley and Lee Jordan, who snickered at *wetness*. Jasmine turned around to glare at them, which only made them laugh harder.

“More broadly, the Drought Charm is a drying charm,” Flitwick said. He was one of the professors who adopted the tack of ignoring the Weasley twins. “A drying charm. The name is rather ambitious, I’m afraid, as only the most powerful witches and wizards can perform a Drought Charm that desiccates anything larger than a small pond!”

Flitwick jumped down from his books, then marched to the door. “Students, follow me! Today’s lesson shall commence out of doors!”

There was some groaning, but people began getting out of their seats. Harry cast an Ink-Drying Charm on his notes. It was better than the Hot Air Charm, which had a tendency to blow the ink around.

“Should we bring our things, professor?” Jasmine asked.

“That won’t be necessary, Miss Rookwood,” Flitwick said from the door. “Come along, come along!”

Harry walked next to Jasmine, following the other Slytherins and Gryffindors out of the castle. Like Defense Against the Dark Arts, there were enough people in N.E.W.T. Charms to warrant two classes. Charms was generally considered the soft option for their spellcasting courses, similar to the divide between Arithmancy and Divination. However, it was simply the way Flitwick taught it. He was a more permissive teacher than McGonagall.

Once outside, Flitwick directed them to spread out across the muddy grounds and begin practicing. Harry meandered towards the lake, wondering if there was a charm strong enough to dry the entire thing. It would devastate the Hogwarts ecosystem, removing the largest source of water. Not to mention what it would do to all of the plants and creatures living in the Black Lake. There would be mass death. A massacre.

Harry took out his wand, pointing at a small puddle near his feet, the sort that would dry out as the day progressed. "*Siccescentem.*"

The water evaporated almost immediately, steam rising into the chill, late morning air. Around him, his friends and classmates were attempting the spell at varying volumes and levels of enthusiasm. Jasmine was in Charms Club, so she also had a successful first attempt. Harry sighed and continued casting the spell, steadily drying the lawn.

His dad was right. It would be rank stupidity to break into the headmaster's office. It was filled with portraits, which he could deal with, and a phoenix, which he couldn't. Harry had no idea what the repercussions would be if he attacked the headmaster's phoenix, or any phoenix. Fawkes wasn't exactly a defenseless animal. The bird had maimed a thousand-year-old basilisk.

It was the waiting that was getting to him. Waiting for the Second Task. Waiting for Skeeter's next article. Waiting for his brother to have another dream that made his scar hurt. Harry knew he had been sloppy with Skeeter, and it was a relief his dad was willing to clean up after his mess. Even with Skeeter's ability to spy on people curtailed, Harry was nervous.

The question of who had put his brother's name in the Goblet of Fire remained unanswered. That they had done it right under Dumbledore's nose, none the wiser, meant Skeeter wasn't the only one adept at sneaking about. Harry had already advised Monty to keep an eye on the Marauder's Map. It was the one advantage they had. But so far, nothing. Months of nothing.

Harry kept drying out the grass, targeting larger puddles of water, doing his best not to completely drain the area lest he inadvertently kill the grass. He felt like he should be doing something, something more. Something useful.

He almost envied Percy, having someone to give him orders. He at least had a direction, while Harry was swimming in place. Monty was confident he had everything worked out. His dad wanted him to focus on school, to trust people older and wiser to look after Monty. His friends wanted to play quidditch, play gobstones, complain about homework, mess around.

Harry had no idea what he wanted to do anymore.

The dormitory was noisy. Harry hadn't put up a silencing charm. The clamor helped drown out his circling thoughts.

Adrian, Cassius, and Terence had all been riding the high of their landslide victory over Ravenclaw. Terence and Adrian were playing a game of Exploding Snap, Adrian grumbling and scratching at the beard he was trying to grow. Cassius was doing something with knuckle bones; Harry hadn't seen him cast bones in a while, so it was somewhat interesting.

Harry was on his bed, holding the Hungarian Horntail model above him. He didn't take the Swedish Short-Snout out when others were around, it was too blatant a connection to Monty. As it was, he had to stun the little dragon to examine her. The scales were miniscule, perfect replicas of the real thing. She was a work of art.

"What do you think, Haz?"

Harry looked over at Adrian, who was stroking his patchy beard.

"He thinks it makes him look more manly," Terence explained. "I think he looks like a prat."

Harry shrugged. He wasn't a fan, and he doubted it was winning Adrian any favors with Jasmine, but he saw no need to disparage his friend. "A valiant effort."

Adrian scoffed. "Don't know why I bothered asking. You can't appreciate my rugged charms."

"Is that what you're calling it?" Cassius said, knuckle bones rattling in his hand.

"Weasley's corrupted you," Adrian declared. "You've been moping since the ball."

"Have not," Harry said, checking his watch. He pushed himself up, tucking the dragon model into a pocket. If his friends thought he was pining over Percy, that was fine. It was true to some degree, but not his most pressing concern. Percy was doing great.

"I've got rounds," Harry said.

It was a lie, but not one they could contradict. No one kept tabs on his schedule. Harry could have got out of his prefect duties by virtue of being the Hogwarts champion, but he had chosen not to. He liked wandering around the castle at night. It gave him some time alone, and he didn't have to sacrifice sleep for it.

Harry left his dormitory, shutting the door just as the cards exploded, and on Adrian's agonized moans about the damage to his facial hair. Percy had finally worked out what Harry had meant. What was obvious to someone who had grown up with television wasn't to those raised in magical households. It did, however, seem Percy was coming to his wit's end.

As he walked through the dungeons, making his way towards the Owlery, Harry pulled out the letter Percy had sent him. Harry could tell from Percy's brevity that he was overworked and frustrated. Harry wished he had just told Percy his idea, rather than cause him more stress.

Evans,

Muggle cameras are on the Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects. Video cameras and televisions are not. This needs to be completely above board. The Department, the entire Ministry, has come under fire repeatedly since the Quidditch World Cup. I dare not even present the idea as-is to Mr. Crouch, who has been working himself to the bone to ensure the Triwizard Tournament runs smoothly, to little avail.

While my father's proclivities would certainly be beneficial in this situation, he simply does not have the time for such an onerous pursuit...

Harry read it a few times, his heart sinking. Percy was annoyed, and desperate if he was asking his dad for help. He hated Percy being annoyed with him, and it really was Harry's own fault for being so indirect. It was him messing up again.

He reached the Owlery, which was thankfully empty after curfew. There were plenty of school owls to choose from. Harry approached a barn owl, who gave him a curious look. He took out his reply to Percy. It was rather long, as he had given a thorough description of the Protean Charm, as well as his concept of a one-way mirror. It wasn't a unique idea, as he had got it from Monty and his two-way mirror.

Harry had no idea how the set of two-way mirrors worked. He had never actually seen Monty's mirror, but from his brother's description it transmitted both image and sound, displaying the person who held the other mirror. It didn't work like a Protean Charm, which required a master item that the subordinate items connected to it would imitate. Harry assumed what Monty had was some artifact of the Black family, otherwise two-way mirrors would be far more common.

Harry tied his letter to Percy to the owl's leg and carried her to the window. She leapt from his arm, and Harry watched her fly across the grounds, beating her wings to gain height. As she vanished from sight, Harry felt his skin crawl.

Smiling to himself, Harry turned around and left the Owlery, his brother invisibly following him. He walked through the seventh-floor corridor, bypassing the Room of Requirement. He had already tried finding the books he needed in there. He had been unsuccessful; the books were not the sort one would lose, so Harry speculated. He had no idea *what* the books were, only that books existed, stashed in the headmaster's office.

He easily avoided encountering anyone on his way out of the castle. Patrolling prefects, nosy portraits, wandering spirits. Monty kept pace, as silent as a ghost. Lady Madeleine joined them in the entrance hall, likely having led Mrs. Norris on a merry chase. Instead of walking across the grounds to the shore of the lake, where the Durmstrang ship sat like a derelict, Harry skirted the castle. There were steps built along the cliff which most students only used three times in their lives: at the start and end of first year, and once they graduated. Harry himself had only recently recalled the existence of the harbor, and the boats it contained.

The harbor was deserted, the lanterns on the boats unlit. The rocks were slick and jagged underfoot. Harry lit his wand, holding it up so his brother could see as well. The water lapped gently at the rocks, ripples coming from the dark, narrow tunnel that led to the Black Lake. Their footsteps echoed. Harry waved at the cave walls, silencing them lest they attract any attention.

“How have you been?” Harry asked quietly, turning to smile at his brother. Monty emerged from under his invisibility cloak, looking around the underground harbor.

“I haven’t been here since first year,” Monty said. “I forgot it existed.”

Harry smirked, then walked closer to where the boats were shored. He tapped his wand against a lantern, and it flared with light. “I’m counting on that.” He began dragging a boat higher onto the rocks, feeling restless. “How are classes? Your friends?”

“Classes are alright,” Monty said, walking to join him. Harry pointed at another boat, and Monty climbed in. “Hermione and Ron are still being weird. I think Ron fancies her.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. “I heard about that row during the Yule Ball.”

“I think the entire school heard,” Monty muttered. “They’re both pretending nothing happened. I expected Ron to do that, since that’s what he’s been doing since the First Task, but Hermione’s the one who always wants to talk about stuff. It’s fine, for the most part, unless Hermione mentions Krum, or Ron sees Krum, or anything Krum-related. Did I tell you he dismembered his Krum figurine?”

“That’s only slightly less creepy than having bought one,” Harry said. “I don’t know your mate Ron that well, but he strikes me as a bit like his mum.”

“Mrs. Weasley?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, flipping the boat over. He frowned at the keel. At least, he thought that was what it was called. It was a strip of wood sticking out of the boat’s flat bottom.

“What do you mean?” Monty asked.

Harry crouched down, placing a hand on the rowboat. “She’s the type to pretend nothing’s wrong.” He looked up at Monty, who was frowning in distaste.

“Sounds like the Dursleys,” Monty said. “They want everyone to think they’re normal. They’d rather tell people I’m in an institute for boys who are *mentally subnormal*.”

“Yeah, well,” Harry said, standing up. “The difference between your aunt and Mrs. Weasley is that Mrs. Weasley is genuinely nice. Most of the time,” he amended. “I doubt she’ll be inviting me round the Burrow any time soon.”

“Why not?” Monty asked.

Harry shook his head, then walked to the boat his brother was sitting in. “Alright. You’ve got the Bubble Head Charm down. Besides all the defensive spells you already know, there are

only two more spells you need for the Second Task.”

Harry placed his foot on the gunwale of the boat and kicked it into the water. It rocked unsteadily back and forth. Monty grabbed the sides, glaring at Harry. Lady Madeleine jumped at Monty, and he fell backwards into the boat with a yelp.

“Take a deep breath,” Harry said, raising his wand.

“Wait—”

“*Descendio!*”

The headmaster’s office was claustrophobic with Karkaroff and Maxime. Maxime, in no small part due to her impressive size. Karkaroff, as he would not stop staring at Severus. He almost wished Charity was there to fend the man off with her axe. Severus certainly had no desire to interact with someone who had given his name to the Ministry to save his own arse. He had even less of an inclination to compare Dark Marks. Severus knew it was getting darker. Everyone with a Dark Mark knew it was getting darker. Karkaroff had betrayed his fellow Death Eaters, in a more direct way than those who paid off the Ministry or claimed to be under Imperius. Had he not considered the repercussions?

The only way their little meeting could be more painfully awkward was if Crouch were there.

“Are you certain, Severus?” McGonagall asked, frowning in consternation.

“Unless you have a better suggestion,” he shot back.

McGonagall’s lips thinned, but she said nothing more.

Dumbledore smiled at all of them. “I am pleased we have reached an accord! Now, we must contact the respective families, where possible,” he added, nodding to Karkaroff. Karkaroff scowled; as stupid as he had been in squealing like a stuck pig as soon as the screws began to turn, he enjoyed his pathetic life enough to not test Dumbledore.

“And how are we meant to judge?” Maxime asked. “If we cannot see into the lake?”

“I am assured that is under consideration,” Dumbledore said. “For the time being, I shall speak with Merchieftainess Murcus. She and her warriors are reliable reporters, should alternatives fail.”

Karkaroff’s scowl deepened. No doubt he had already told Krum to kill as many merpeople as he wanted.

It had taken Severus too long to fully appreciate the practical effect the hatred for nonhuman magical life had. Giants driven to near extinction, merpeople landlocked in the rare magical enclave, selkies hiding among seal colonies, centaurs forced to share land with children who believed them subhuman. Every death made the world slightly less magical. Even if one could not see the value of life in and of itself, magic was the one thing they all had in common.

He sounded like a hippy.

“Severus, would you stay a moment?” Dumbledore asked.

Karkaroff shot him another look, but Maxime soon blocked his view, herding the man to the door. McGonagall’s lips thinned further, but she followed the two out of the office.

“Join me by the window, would you?” the headmaster said, rising from his desk. The phoenix sang a few notes, and Dumbledore smiled.

Severus, who was already standing next to a window, did not move. “What is it?”

“How is Harry doing?” Dumbledore asked, gazing out out another window. Severus rolled his eyes, then moved to join the headmaster as he stared at the lake. It was a full moon, and he would have preferred keeping an eye on Lupin. Instead, he was looking at a lake.

“Evans?” Severus said. “Shouldn’t you be more concerned with Potter?”

Dumbledore smile broadened. “Your constant refrain. No, I believe Monty is thoroughly prepared for the Second Task. He will do Hogwarts proud.”

Severus sneered. “This is not a matter to make light of, Dumbledore. We still know nothing of how, or why, Potter’s name got into the Goblet of Fire.”

“We agreed to let events unfold, Severus,” Dumbledore said, his eyes not leaving the Black Lake. “Indeed, there is little else we can do at this time.”

Severus crossed his arms, and did not look at the headmaster’s books. He had never wasted thought on how Monty Potter had survived, only that Lily had died. He could almost hear her berating him, for caring more about a dead woman than the child she had left behind. One of her children. One whom Severus had sworn to protect.

Had the Dark Lord been mad enough to do something to his own soul?

“Evans is fine,” Severus said. “I believe he remains frustrated with the tournament. He regards it as an inconvenience.”

Dumbledore inclined his head, still looking at the Black Lake.

“He has also petitioned to take his final exams,” Severus added. “He believes failure to do so will diminish his chances of becoming Head Boy.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. “What did you tell him?”

“That neither he nor Potter are exempt from exams,” Severus said acidly. “It seems Potter has an identical concern regarding prefecthood.”

“Rather unlike his father,” Dumbledore said musingly, placing his hands on the window sill.

Severus looked at the lake again, trying to discern what the headmaster saw, not wishing to speculate whose father Dumbledore meant.

Cameras aren't the only 'muggle artifacts' that display an image, Percy. Use a mirror.

Yours,

Harry

Percy tucked the note into his robes his ears burning. It had been written on the inside of the envelope Harry had sent, an envelope which contained an exhaustive treatment of Protean Charms, as well as outlining several possibilities for implementation during the Second Task. Perhaps Harry was accustomed to creatures trailing him around, but it was not an entirely easy thing to accomplish.

He had considered suggesting to Mr. Crouch that they approach the merpeople, but Percy's job was to make Mr. Crouch's easier, not harder. He was already feeling guilty for importuning Harry. Harry was a student, and a Triwizard champion. The practical arrangements of the tournament should never have been his concern. And yet, as soon as he had opened that golden egg, Harry had sought a solution.

Percy had to admit it was a relief to finally *have* a solution to a problem present since the beginning of the tournament. No one else seemed inclined to help.

He waited until his blush subsided. It was happening less frequently, though Harry remained a common cause for Percy's discomposure. Once he felt less likely to embarrass himself, he stood from his desk, and walked the few paces to Mr. Crouch's office. The door was already open

“What is it, Weasley?” Mr. Crouch said, snapping a dragonskin briefcase shut. It was smooth, made from the underbelly of a Hebridean Black. Not that Percy could identify dragonskin on sight.

“I believe I have found a solution to our viewing problem, sir,” Percy said. “A fairly simple one.”

Mr. Crouch looked up at him. “Continue.”

“An application of the Protean Charm to mirrors,” Percy said. “The master mirrors would be with the champions, which the audience may view through larger, subordinate mirrors.”

Mr. Crouch frowned, then turned to take his cloak down from a peg. “My presence is required at Hogwarts. I must speak with the merpeople.”

“Yes, sir,” Percy said, feeling his stomach drop. It was as good as an outright rejection.

“I expect a functioning model upon my return,” Mr. Crouch said, donning his cloak. He nodded to Percy, then swept down the corridor.

“Absolutely, sir,” Percy said faintly, stunned at the trust being placed in him. He hurried back to his desk. He had work to do.

In the Weeds

Chapter Summary

February 24th, 1995

Second Task

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Are you sure this is alright?”

Harry didn’t look up from his work. He was crouched in a rowboat, *Nautical Charms for Magical Yardarms* spread open on one of its benches.

“You should be at breakfast,” Harry said, scratching more runes into the wood.

“So should you,” Monty countered, walking up to the boat.

Harry took a breath, then looked up at Monty. Monty was fully dressed, and appeared well-rested. Harry had gone to bed early the night before, downing a Sleeping Draught to force his body to get some rest. Sleeping Draughts had begun appearing on his bedside table, a not-so-subtle hint from his dad that he needed sleep.

“The rules for the Second Task did not stipulate you could only bring your wand,” Harry said. “And, as far as I know, the school hasn’t got any rules regarding the boats.” He cut a line across his palm with his wand, then pressed his hand against the wood. His blood flowed with surprising quickness, filling the runes he had carved.

“What are you doing?” Monty asked, frowning at the runes.

“I had to strip the enchantments from this boat,” Harry said. “It’s only meant to go from the dock at Hogsmeade Station to here, and back again.” He hadn’t been able to find a boat-conjuring spell. It would have made his life easier. “I’ve had to reprogram it, so to speak.”

Harry stood, stretching his back. Even with the Sleeping Draught, he had woken up very early.

“I could’ve swum, you know,” Monty said, giving him a concerned look. “You didn’t need to go to all this trouble.”

Harry shrugged, smiling faintly. “I already have. Don’t worry about it.”

His annoyance with everyone had grown as it became increasingly apparent no adult was helping Monty. Harry didn't doubt Sirius Black would, but he wasn't at Hogwarts, and had been in Azkaban for over a decade. He simply didn't know as much magic as others his age, nor had he used magic at all during his imprisonment. Other than turning into a dog, which had limited utility in their present circumstances.

"There's still time for breakfast," Harry offered.

Monty shook his head. "I don't think I can eat. Aren't you not supposed to eat before swimming?"

"No idea," Harry said, climbing out of the boat. "Sounds made up."

Harry stood on the shore of the Black Lake, looking across the water. It was a chilly February morning, and those already in the stands were bundled up. He was in swim shorts and a plain shirt. Viktor was the only other one who looked ready to swim, as he was in a pair of trunks. Fleur and Monty were both fully robed.

He glanced at the judges' table, which was draped in cloth-of-gold. The three heads of school were there, as well as Bagman and Crouch, but Harry only had eyes for Percy. Percy was wearing robes that matched the dark grey waters of the Black Lake. He was bent over, talking rapidly to Crouch, holding a box. Harry tore his eyes away, not wanting to draw attention for lingering on Percy, and looked instead at the stands. It was a large crowd, larger than Harry had anticipated. His friends were there, seated together and looking relieved to see him. He had been something of a recluse over the past week, devoting all of his time to ensuring no harm would come to his brother during the Second Task.

Strangely, some of his friends' parents were there. He saw Mr. and Mrs. Urquhart, the former with Mhairi on his lap. Mhairi waved at him. Confused, Harry raised his hand to wave back, then froze.

His eyes darted around the stands. Luna's dad was there, smiling vaguely around him. But no Luna. No Astrid.

The thing he would *sorely miss* wasn't his gobstones set, but his best friend. They had taken Astrid without his knowledge, and trapped her under the lake. Harry ground his teeth together. He knew, he hoped, she wouldn't come to any harm. They wouldn't kill his friend for some stupid tournament.

Monty had also noticed Mr. Lovegood. He was coming to the same conclusion, and seemed genuinely worried. Harry glared at the judges, who all looked utterly nonplussed.

"Evans."

Harry flinched, then looked up at Percy. Percy was holding a medallion out to him. Harry bent his head, letting Percy place it around him. The pendant was a mirror.

“Don’t touch it,” Percy said. “It’s charmed to stay in place.” He paused, then added, “Good luck.”

Harry watched him move along the line, handing medallions to Viktor, Fleur, and Monty. Percy pulled four matching mirrors from his robes and sent them to hover above the lake. Harry smiled as Percy expertly enlarged them, pleased to see he had got the Protean charm to work. The large mirrors showed rather mundane images of the surface of the Black Lake.

Bagman walked towards him, giving Harry a shaky smile. “If you could, ah, move a few feet further down, Mr. Evans.”

Harry stared at Bagman until he backed off, going instead to move the other champions away from Harry. Bagman stayed with Monty the longest. Monty shook his head, and Bagman wilted slightly before rejoining his fellow judges. Harry glanced at Percy again, who was giving him a worried look. Of all who conspired to place Astrid and Luna in the middle of the Black Lake in February, Harry would only forgive Percy for not telling him. Maybe he thought Harry would work out it was a hostage scenario.

“The champions have precisely an hour to retrieve what has been taken from them,” Bagman’s voice echoed across the lake. Harry blinked, realizing he had been looking at Percy for too long. He turned back to the lake, his grip tightening on his wand. Maybe he *could* dry up the whole thing

“On my whistle,” Bagman said excitedly. “One, two, three!”

Monty raised his wand, his heart racing. They had taken Luna. Not his invisibility cloak, or his Firebolt. *Luna*.

“*Accio* boat,” he snapped, thinking fiercely of the rowboat Harry had soaked with his own blood. It had been a disturbing sight to come across, but now Monty was grateful for whatever extreme measures Harry had taken.

Harry didn’t stick around to see if Monty’s summoning charm had worked. Instead, as soon as the whistle blew Harry sprinted at the water, a bubble contracting around his mouth. Fleur had also cast the Bubble Head Charm, and looked like she regretted wearing robes as she struggled through the water. Monty had seen an older woman who looked like Fleur, but more intense, sitting in the stands next to an elegant man. Fleur’s parents. Did she have a sibling who had been taken hostage?

Monty relaxed when he heard the sound of water parting, looking away from Viktor’s strange shark-head transfiguration to where one of the school’s rowboats was cleaving the lake.

“It seems Monty has summoned a boat,” Bagman announced. “Monty, my boy, your objective is *in* the lake!”

“Piss off,” Monty muttered as the boat skidded to a halt. He pushed it back into the water and clambered inside, almost wishing he had summoned his Firebolt. He didn’t know how the broom would fare underwater, though. Monty stuck his wand in the water, murmuring a spell that created a stream of air. The boat shot off across the water, towards the middle of the lake. Monty removed his wand from the water, raising it to conjure a bubble over the entire boat. He added an extra bubble, just in case.

He passed a large otter swimming on its back, holding a clam in its paws. Monty stared at it, wondering where both the otter and clam had come from. Shaking his head, Monty veered away.

When he was about halfway across the lake, approximately above the merpeople village as indicated by very recent additions to the Marauder’s Map, Monty raised his wand again.

“*Descendio!*”

Harry punched a grindylow in the face. It was a weak punch, lacking the same momentum underwater, but he was annoyed to encounter grindylows so close to shore. He only had half an hour to get to Astrid. He didn’t have time to fuck around.

One or two grindylows were fine, but there was an entire colony of the fucking things hiding under the algae that grew in the shallows. Their sharp claws dug into his skin as the grindylows dragged him down.

Gritting his teeth, Harry let himself be pulled into the slimy algae, waiting for the grindylows to group up.

“*Relashio!*”

Boiling water surged around him, breaking apart the algae and scalding the grindylows. They shrieked in reedy voices, fleeing the onslaught. Harry was glad he couldn’t smell anything. He could only imagine how foul boiled grindylow was.

He flipped around, swimming deeper into the murky water. He knew from having explored the lake that the bottom dropped off fairly quickly, and the temperature plummeted. He couldn’t tell if the water was any warmer than it had been in December. It was slightly easier to see, as the lake wasn’t covered in ice, nor was it the middle of the night.

The lake was eerily silent. Harry had no idea where Viktor or Fleur had gone off to, having immediately been waylaid by grindylows. He narrowed his eyes, unable to pierce the gloom. The library was rather poor in terms of books on human transfiguration. It was dangerous,

and from experience Harry knew it was painful. Transfiguring his eyes was not something he had considered doing. It was too risky.

While Harry had planned on putting on another show, knowing Astrid was being held hostage had changed his mind. Now he wanted to get to the merpeople village as soon as possible. He also knew Monty was going directly there, and wanted to make sure his brother arrived in one piece.

Harry tucked his wand into his swim shorts and swam decisively forward, skimming over a patch of swaying bulrush. He had only gone a few feet when something bit into his ankle and dragged him down.

Monty sighed, leaning back on the bench he sat on. The bubbles had made the rowboat more buoyant, and it wasn't sinking as quickly as when he had practiced. He smiled as he passed a school of plimpies, their inflated bodies propelled by spindly legs. Luna had promised to teach him how to make plimpy soup over summer holiday.

It was rather peaceful, if boring.

Harry wrapped his hands around the neck of a kelpie, squeezing with all of his strength, furious with himself at putting his wand away. The kelpie had taken the form of a horse, covered in slick stalks of bulrush. It bared its teeth at him, thrashing its powerful fish tail as its forelegs tried to disembowel him.

The kelpie wasn't alone. More rose from what Harry had assumed was an underwater meadow of bulrushes. He had been mistaken. It was a herd of sleeping kelpies.

The kelpie he wrestled with scored a ragged line across his stomach. Harry hissed in pain, his skin prickling as the kelpies entered a frenzy at the scent of his blood.

Harry closed his eyes as the kelpie tried to shake him off, forelegs beating at him as it attempted to eviscerate him.

"*Sectumsempra*," Harry growled, feeling sickening satisfaction as the kelpie was decapitated. He was afraid the spell wouldn't work without his wand, but he needed the creature dead before it succeeded in killing him.

Kelpies did not discriminate. As the halves of their fellow kelpie drifted in the water, they swarmed past Harry and began to feed, tearing gory pieces of their kin off, dark blood

suffusing the water. Harry took hold of his wand, pointing at the wild kelpies who were busily grinding the flesh of one of their own between their vicious teeth.

“Inretio argenteus,” Harry said, relaxing slightly as a silver net ensnared the kelpies. They struggled frantically against it, once they realized what was happening. Harry swam past them, placing a hand on his stomach wound. It wasn’t fatal, but it stung badly. He had no idea what sort of diseases a kelpie might carry, and silently cast charms to bandage his stomach and repair his torn shirt.

The water grew colder, and darker, as Harry swam deeper. He was wary now, his head swiveling around to check for danger. Perhaps the Black Lake had been more quiescent when it was colder, and the impending spring had roused its inhabitants.

Harry paused as a sleek, slender figure appeared before him. It was an otter, a clam clutched in its paws. Harry raised his wand, instantly suspicious of any otter that swam so deep. That it had a clam put him further on edge. What the fuck was going on?

He was not concerned with the clam for long, as the otter rippled, expanded, its body bursting apart in clumps of fur and bloody chunks of flesh. Harry closed his eyes, water raging around him and forcing him back. He held his wand in front of him, squinting to see what was going on.

Harry shoved a hand into his pocket, pulling out a vial of Calming Draught. He had to dispel the bubble around his head to drink it, swallowing as fast as he could.

The otter had been another kelpie, but not just any kelpie. The creature before him was enormous. She had the head of a sea serpent, with fiery eyes and rows of jagged teeth, sharp and weathered scales plating her neck. Her body was large, like that of a whale, with four massive flippers that sent her racing towards him.

Harry’s mind blanked, the potion and his occlumency fighting to reconcile the reality of his predicament. Nothing could have prepared him for encountering the Loch Ness Monster.

Monty sighed, then sat up when he saw the first signs of habitation. He had been slightly off when estimating where the merpeople village was. He carefully poked his wand through the bubbles, shooting a jet of water to push him forward. He passed over a rock with a mural depicting the merfolk fighting the Giant Squid, and soon found himself sailing among the stone houses of the village. Monty had never seen a merperson in real life before, though he had seen drawings of them in books.

They looked nothing like the mermaid in the prefects’ bathroom, which Monty suspected had been a fantasy of the artist’s. The only similarity was the fish tail, though the merpeople had silver, practical-looking tails. They were in general very fish-like, which made sense given

they lived in the water, with grey skin and dark green hair that undulated like kelp. The merpeople he passed seemed just as intrigued by him, so Monty smiled and waved.

Someone was singing, the same song that was in the golden egg, and Monty followed the music. He soon came upon a large statue of a merperson, to which four people were tied. He spotted Luna right away, her hair a pale halo in the water, fast asleep. Monty looked at the other hostages. Astrid Urquhart, Hermione which both surprised and worried him, and a little girl who looked like Delacour's sister.

Monty looked around at the crowd of merpeople, and realized he was the first to arrive. Where was Harry? Shaking his head, Monty moved the boat closer to Luna, sent a severing charm at the woven ropes of kelp binding her to the statue, and pulled her into the safety of his makeshift submarine.

She woke up immediately, then turned over to cough out some water. "Hello, Fleamont."

"Hello, Luna," Monty said, casting a charm to dry her off. She was soaking wet, and deathly pale. He glanced at the little girl, then Hermione. Urquhart, despite being asleep, was smiling like a maniac.

"We should go," Luna said, joining him on the bench. "Harry wouldn't like it."

"We could take everyone with us," Monty suggested.

"They will be fine," Luna said. "The headmaster explained it before he enchanted us." She tapped the mirror that hung around his neck. "Don't you want to see what Harry does?"

Monty frowned, feeling guilty about leaving his friend and a little girl underwater, but he did want to see what sort of magic Harry did. "You're right. There's no point in staying here if no one's in danger." He pointed his wand at the hull and said, "*Ascendio*."

Luna smiled at him, and the boat began to rise.

Harry couldn't fight Nessie. She was ancient, a national treasure, magical, and extremely strong. He couldn't swim fast enough to get away from her, and was very reluctant to injure such an icon. She had no such compunction, snapping viciously at him, battering him with her powerful tail. Harry had barely had time to conjure another bubble around his face, and the force of her blows threatened to pop it. His mind reeled, struggling to think of what he could do against such a creature. It had been proposed, more than once, that the Loch Ness Monster be relocated to the Black Lake. He hadn't thought anyone would actually go through with it.

He tried conjuring another net around her, but she exploded through, tearing the magical ropes as if they were gossamer. She opened her mouth, clearly intending on swallowing

Harry whole. Desperate, Harry slashed his wand through the water.

“Fulgari!”

Golden ropes wrapped around Nessie’s snout. She reared back, glared at him, then transformed to escape. She became an otter again, a very angry otter, a creature which was still a superior swimmer to Harry. He didn’t hesitate. He had the potions vial. It expanded with barely a thought, engulfing the crazed otter. Terrified she would break free again, Harry sent the vial spiraling through the water, up towards the surface.

He needed to get out of the lake as soon as possible. He needed the task to be over.

Harry kicked hard, and swam deeper into the water.

The rowboat breached the surface, bobbing a few times before settling down. Monty dispelled the bubbles, and directed the boat towards the shore.

“And it looks like Monty Potter is the first one back with his hostage!” Bagman exclaimed. “Very neatly done!”

There was a splash, and Monty turned to see an otter encased in glass floating nearby. It scrabbled angrily at its prison, then its fur began to fall out as it turned into a demonic snake, throwing its body against the glass.

“What the fuck?”

Harry had completely lost his sense of direction. He checked his watch, annoyed to see a half hour had already passed. He carefully laid his wand on his palm, using the Four-Point Spell to get some information. He didn’t have time to backtrack and start again. He wished he had mapped the topography of the entire Black Lake. He had no idea when he would have found the time, but it would have been useful. He’d only helped add landmarks to the Marauder’s Map. In the middle of the lake, where there was little light, nothing distinguishable, knowing landmarks was useless.

Frustrated, Harry began swimming for the surface. He needed more visibility. He could get to the merpeople village fairly quickly, once he knew where the bloody thing was.

As he looked for something he recognized, his ears straining for any hint of mersong, a shadow passed over Harry. A large shadow. He looked up apprehensively, worried Nessie had broken out of her temporary prison.

It was much worse.

The Giant Squid loomed above Harry, her tentacles pointed like an arrow. She was swimming towards him, her huge, ribbon-like fins rippling, pushing the water down. Pushing Harry down. She was bright red, a painful color that filled Harry with alarm. He had never seen the Giant Squid attack a student. Instead, she seemed to like them, saving children who fell into the lake, playing with them, accepting snacks.

As she swam towards Harry, her tentacles aimed at him like a spear, Harry knew what she was. A predator. A kraken, who occasionally fed on merpeople. Harry had never seen the Giant Squid's entire body, and he now realized that she, not the Hungarian Horntail, was the largest creature he had ever encountered.

Harry kicked his legs, feeling small, weak, furious at the Giant Squid deciding that now was the time to develop a taste for Hogwarts students.

He pointed his wand at the squid. There would be calamari on the menu that evening.

The Giant Squid was fast, too fast for Harry to react. She had been much nearer than he assumed, the churning water and her size distorting his perception. Her long feeder tentacles shot out, one coiling around Harry and pulling him with dreadful speed through the water.

When the rowboat reached the shore, Monty climbed out first. He turned and offered his hand to Luna, helping her disembark. She had insisted on capturing the otter-snake-thing, and had its glass enclosure tucked under an arm.

Madam Pomfrey appeared, forcing Pepperup Potions on them. The headmaster was with her, his normally genial expression grave.

"I'll take that, Miss Lovegood," Professor Dumbledore said, gently taking the trapped otter creature from Luna. It kept transforming into different animals, trying to break through the glass. "While I am sure Hagrid would be thrilled to add her to our marine menagerie, I'm afraid she already has a home."

"She?" Monty asked, just as the water exploded behind him. He spun around, watching in awe as the Giant Squid breached the surface. Her skin was a poisonous red, and her huge tentacles thrashed around, sending massive waves at the shore. There was something in one of her tentacles. A person. Monty squinted to see who it was, his blood running cold when he recognized them.

Someone in the audience screamed. Luna grabbed his hand.

Somehow, inexplicably, Harry was fighting the Giant Squid.

Harry couldn't breathe. The squid was squeezing the air out of him, crushing his ribs. He couldn't get an arm free. His wand was trapped. There was a horrible *crack*, and a blindingly sharp pain. The Giant Squid had broken one of his arms, and it was only luck that it wasn't his wand arm.

As he was whipped through the air, dozens of feet above the water, his ears ringing from the hysteric, terrified screaming of the audience, dizzy, nauseated, suffocated, Harry thought savagely of fire.

Incendio. Incendio. Incendio!

The immense tentacle around him began to sizzle, the water coursing down in rivulets vaporizing into superheated steam. Harry grimaced as the heat of his own spell seared him. The tentacle crushing him began to crackle and blister. The stench curdled Harry's stomach.

The Giant Squid released him, smashing her burning tentacle into the water. Harry gasped, taking in a ragged breath as he fell through the air. The surface of the lake was growing closer and closer, rushing towards him.

She wasn't done. The Giant Squid's uninjured feeder tentacle lashed out, wrapping around his legs. Harry panicked, slashing his wand down and severing the appendage in a gout of thick blue blood. He hit the water feet first, clenching his teeth against the pain. The Giant Squid was everywhere, her other tentacles twisting around him, pushing him towards her vicious, massive black beak, clacking in anticipation of her next meal.

Harry tried to shout a spell, but there was almost no air in his lungs. Nevertheless, his body was forced down by his spell, deeper into the lake, moving at a frightening speed. The pressure increased, his lungs seizing.

He slammed into the muddy lake bed, the remaining air forced out of his lungs. He couldn't move. He couldn't breathe. He needed to *breathe*.

He let go of his wand, clumsily shoving his hand into his pocket, grasping the writhing mass of tentacles within. He pulled out the gillyweed and crammed it into his mouth, choking the disgusting plant down. He slapped the mud, unearthing his wand, relieved it hadn't been broken by the Giant Squid's assault. Harry curled up as the gillyweed took effect, his eyes swimming with darkness. There was an awful, piercing pain around his throat as his body transformed. The cold water that threatened to freeze his limbs felt warmer, almost soothing despite the pain radiating from his broken arm and cracked ribs.

Harry sucked in the cloudy water, shuddering. He didn't know if he could handle another encounter like the Giant Squid. He had no idea what the hell was happening. He was only glad it was happening to him, and not his brother.

Percy stood frozen in numb horror. The mirror showing Harry's perspective grew darker and darker as he sank towards the bottom. Monty had already returned with Luna Lovegood, and the girl hadn't let go of him as the nightmare unfolded. Viktor Krum had returned with Hermione Granger, and needed help with untransfiguring his shark head. It was disturbing, though not so much as Harry falling through the air to his death. Fleur Delacour had also returned, her robes torn and bloody from an encounter with enraged grindylows. They had targeted her after being unsuccessful with Harry.

Percy sagged with relief when he saw the gillyweed. Death was always a possibility, an expectation even, with the Triwizard Tournament. No one had stepped in to help Harry with any of the increasingly deadly creatures he encountered. Percy was still boggling over the Loch Ness Monster—he had no knowledge of any other kelpie that size, and could not comprehend how she had traveled from Loch Ness to Hogwarts. It made no sense.

Harry was the only one still in the Black Lake. Percy did not want to look away to check the time. It didn't matter.

The view shifted. Harry was no longer flat on his back, but pushing himself up, checking the webbing on his hands and feet, looking around for any signs of the Giant Squid. The image blurred as he kicked his way out of the mud, then swam away with impressive speed. Percy clutched his useless clipboard—he hadn't taken a single note—fervently hoping the cruelties inflicted upon Harry had finally come to an end.

Harry was going to kill the next thing that tried to fuck with him. He kicked his legs, darting through the water as naturally as a fish. He had managed a silent Bandaging Charm around his broken arm and ribs, but it was less effective underwater. His ribs still burned, it still hurt to breathe, pain kept shooting up his arm. He was badly injured. The entire Black Lake was out to get him. Astrid was still being held hostage.

It seemed his battle with the Giant Squid had driven the other denizens into hiding. The Giant Squid had also vanished, having already lost two limbs to him. He should have cut the rest of her tentacles off.

He kept swimming.

He barely noticed when he arrived at the merpeople village, too focused on getting to his goal. The merpeople were out en masse, silently watching him as he sped by, a few nervously clutching spears and herding children indoors. He ignored them, finally spotting his destination. It was a large statue of a merperson. Tied to it were Astrid and a little girl who looked like Fleur. Next to them was a large merperson holding a spear, wearing heavy necklaces and bracelets of rocks, a boney crown of fish spines tangled in her wild green hair.

Harry ignored her too, cutting the ropes from Astrid. He glanced at his watch. It had been well over an hour. He looked at the merchieftainess, who stared back indifferently. He looked at the girl again. She couldn't have been older than eight or nine.

"The hour is up," he mouthed. "I'm taking the girl too."

The merchieftainess narrowed her eyes, then her spear swung through the water. It sliced the ropes around the little girl, and she drifted away from the statue. Harry swam forward, but the merchieftainess had already caught the girl, and was swimming away, towards the surface. Annoyed, and relieved he wouldn't have to fight an entire village of merwarriors, Harry stuck his wand between his teeth, grabbed Astrid's arm, and began to swim.

Severus arms tightened around himself, watching as his son drew closer and closer to the surface. The number of obstacles the boy had encountered was absurd. Deadly, and absurd. His son could have died.

Harry finally surfaced, surrounded by merpeople and looking vaguely irritated. Urquhart awoke, then flung herself at him. Severus almost stood up. The stupid girl had no idea how heavily injured his son was. She was hurting him. Moreover, Harry was still under the effect of gillyweed, and would be for almost another hour. Severus only stocked the highest quality.

Charity leaned against him, sighing in relief.

"Thank god it's over," she said. "But also, what the fuck just happened?"

Harry limped onto the shore. His legs were worse off than he had noticed, now that the adrenaline was draining away. Draining away, leaving him cold and empty, shaky. Astrid had no idea what had happened to him, and Harry couldn't explain. He couldn't talk, since his body was part fish and he had to conjure a sphere of water around his head to breathe. Madam Pomfrey hurried forward, her hand filled with vials. She took one look at him, got out her wand, and spelled the potions directly into his stomach. Harry swayed, nearly slipping on the rocks, but Astrid caught him before he fell.

The little girl was being handed off to a panicking Fleur, who had waded into the water to reach her sister. Gabrielle. Hermione was huddled under a towel, talking quietly to Viktor. Monty was visibly strained, and Luna was pale and shaking. Harry wanted to flip off the judges for the shit he had just been through, but his hands were still webbed. He could hardly hold on to his wand.

Harry looked around. Dumbledore had stuck his head in the water, and was obviously talking to the merchieftainess. He must not have wanted Crouch listening in, nor Harry if Dumbledore remembered his babelfish.

Astrid carefully lowered him to the ground. The air, the ground, the towel he had been given, all felt horrible against his fish skin. He hated gillyweed with a passion. He doubted Percy was impressed. Harry looked and felt like a fishy git.

Ludo Bagman started talking. Harry could barely hear him through the water around his head.

“Mr. Monty Potter was the first to reach the hostages and the first to return, using both a Summoning Charm and a modified Bubble Head Charm to great effect. For perfect execution, we award him fifty points!”

“I should have refused,” Astrid said in a low voice. “I wanted to watch. How did *Potter* end up in first?”

Harry closed his eyes. Viktor had taken longer than an hour, losing points for that and his questionable transfiguration. Harry didn’t know what he had done. He hadn’t seen anyone else in the Black Lake. Fleur had been attacked by grindylows, which had apparently been too much for her. It was a joke. The entire fucking lake had been mobilized against him. Harry would have laid a trail of destruction if it had been his brother down there. Nothing would have stopped him. And Fleur had been outmaneuvered by *grindylows*. Pathetic.

Bagman cleared his throat. “And finally, Mr. Harry Evans. He, ah, returned well after the time limit...”

Harry shuddered as Madam Pomfrey healed his broken arm, then began working on his ribs. He turned his head slowly to face Bagman, who looked like he was second guessing his entire life.

“And, well,” Bagman stuttered, “the, uh, judges have decided that, given the number of, ah, *unique* challenges Mr. Evans encountered...”

Harry winced as the cracks in his ribs were healed. He felt woozy, from the potions, the pain, the toll on his body. He lifted his good arm, removing the medallion Percy had worked so hard on. Harry bitterly hoped they all enjoyed the show. He hoped whoever was fucking with him was shitting their pants.

“...forty points...”

Astrid released her hold on him, leaping up to shout at Bagman. Madam Pomfrey conjured a stretcher right under him, and Harry gratefully fell back, relieved it was finally over. Monty was in first place. He was fine. They were fine.

His shirt was wet and clinging to him. He hated it. Everyone was looking at him. Percy was looking at him. Harry was too disoriented to do anything about it. He only wanted to get away.

He closed his eyes, and finally felt himself being carried away from the madness at the lake.

Chapter End Notes

[Fanart](#) for this chapter by UnfriendlyMollusk

Potions Interactions

Chapter Summary

February 1995

Chapter Notes

The current scores are

Monty - 87

Harry - 86

Krum - 80

Delacour - 61

The GoF movie is hard to get through. I've seen it so many times...

Percy nervously adjusted his robes, then tapped on the door to the infirmary. Mr. Crouch was with the headmaster, as was Mr. Bagman. The other students were at lunch; while they were meant to resume classes in the afternoon, the headmaster had announced classes were canceled for the remainder of the day. Percy knew he should have been doing damage control, it was his job. The presence of a legendary creature, and the aberrant behavior of a freshwater kraken that had lived in the Black Lake for several centuries without incident, emphasized the illusion that this iteration of the Triwizard Tournament was safer than those in the past.

It had been apparent since Monty Potter was named as a fourth champion. Someone was interfering with the tournament.

Madam Pomfrey appeared, looking absolutely livid. The doors opened slightly.

"No visitors," she snapped.

"I am on Ministry business," Percy said stiffly, standing straighter. "I must inform Mr. Evans about the procedure of the Third Task."

"Third Task?" Madam Pomfrey said, her eyes narrowing. "Blast the Third Task! He hasn't even recovered from the second!"

There was a loud splash, then coughing. "Is that Percy?"

Madam Pomfrey glared at him. “Now see what you’ve done? He needs *rest*, Mr. Weasley!”

“I want to see him,” Harry said in a weak voice.

Percy looked at Madam Pomfrey expectantly.

“Please?”

Madam Pomfrey frowned, but she stood to the side. Percy squeezed by, and the doors snapped shut behind him.

“If you do *anything* to strain him,” Madam Pomfrey said, marching ahead of him, “I’ll be writing to your mother!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Percy said evenly. While a threat like that may have worked in the past, he was growing less concerned with his mother’s opinions. Her attitude regarding Harry was disappointing.

Madam Pomfrey led him to a curtained off area where he had seen Harry bedridden in the past, gave him a look of warning, then opened the curtains.

Percy inhaled sharply.

“Five minutes,” Madam Pomfrey said, before storming away. Her heels clicked aggressively against the floor.

Percy took a step forward, still trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

Instead of a hospital bed, there was a large tank. The water was tinged green and bubbling. Inside, Harry was floating, still wearing his black swim shorts, and a bandage around his chest. As Percy moved closer, the reason for the tank became clear. There were still gills on Harry’s neck, and webbing between his fingers and toes. Percy was selfishly relieved to see Harry’s gillyweed transformation hadn’t displaced the ring, the webbing having grown around it.

Harry’s skin had mostly lost its greenish cast, though it was hard to tell given the color of the water, and his eyes were their normal black. His hair floated around him. He looked like the fey prince of some underwater realm. It was captivating.

Harry gripped the side of his tank, then lifted his head above water. “Like what you see, Weasley?”

Percy blinked, a blush creeping up his neck. “You missed the notification of the Third Task.”

Harry gestured to a chair, and Percy shakily sat down.

“Go on,” Harry said, a slow smile growing on his face. Even under the continued influence of gillyweed, he was striking.

Percy swallowed. “The Third Task will take place at dusk on June 24th. You will be notified of the precise nature of the task a month before.”

Harry dipped underwater again, presumably to breathe, but was quickly back up, pushing wet hair out of his face. Percy gripped the sides of his chair.

“Four months until the next task, but only a month of concentrated planning,” Harry said, sounding exasperated. “Since the first two tasks had us retrieve something, I’m assuming the third will be the same. And that there will be creatures involved. It’s been something of a theme.”

Percy stayed silent. He had...reservations about the tasks himself. They were too similar in nature, and tested too few magical abilities. There was nothing of runes, arithmancy, divination, herbology, potions. Harry had been the only champion to even think of using potions or plants. Harry had, indeed, been showing off. If that was why he was injured...

“Don’t worry,” Harry said gently, giving him a smile that made Percy’s heart stop. “I’m not going to interrogate you. I’m just thinking aloud.”

Percy nodded, trying to get control of himself. He looked at Harry again, his eyes straying more than was decent. Though it had been more than an hour, Harry was still affected by the gillyweed. He had a bandage around his chest, but not his arm or legs. There was a horrible cut across his stomach, vividly inflamed, and a gruesome bite on his ankle that was swollen and leaking a sickly yellow fluid. Across his entire body were large, circular wounds from the Giant Squid’s serrated suckers.

“Why are you in a water tank?” Percy asked. “Why has the gillyweed not worn off?”

Harry crossed his arms on the rim of the tank. “It had an adverse reaction to some ingredients in a potion I took. Madam Pomfrey doesn’t know how long it’ll take to wear off. I also picked up some water dragon parasites when I was fighting off the grindylows. Not to mention the infection from the kelpie bite. Broken arm, cracked ribs, some broken bones in my feet, fractured tibia, ruptured appendix, concussion...”

Percy grew colder with each new injury Harry listed.

“I can’t have Skele-Gro until the gillyweed wears off,” Harry continued. “Turns out it changes your bone structure. Madam Pomfrey might have to rebreak the bones she already healed.”

“You could have died,” Percy whispered, putting a hand to his mouth. “You could’ve died, and it would’ve been my—”

“I didn’t,” Harry said firmly. Percy looked away, his eyes watering. He didn’t understand why it was Harry who faced the most difficulties. The Hungarian Horntail, twice the size of the other dragons. Grindylows and kelpies weren’t outside the realm of possibility, but the Loch Ness Monster? The Giant Squid? Madness. Sheer madness.

Percy flinched when a cold, wet hand cradled his face. He looked up, and saw Harry leaning precariously out of his tank, incredibly close.

"I didn't," Harry said quietly, bending down to softly kiss him. Percy closed his eyes, a few tears escaping.

"I'm so sorry," Percy whispered. "You would never have been in this tournament if it wasn't for me."

Harry huffed in amusement, then kissed him again. "Were you impressed?"

Percy sighed. "You were magnificent."

The curtains were flung open. "It's been five—Mr. Evans! What are you doing out of your tank?"

Percy couldn't move. He felt Harry release him, then heard him slide back into his tank. "Sorry, Madam Pomfrey."

"And you!"

Percy steeled himself, then looked at Madam Pomfrey's enraged face.

"*Ministry business*? Ha! I've heard many excuses in my day, Mr. Weasley, but never has a student shown such blatant audacity!"

"Percy's not a student," Harry began.

Madam Pomfrey spun towards him. "Don't you start with me! Oh my days...if *that's* what the Ministry gets up to, no wonder this tournament is a fiasco!"

"I can assure you," Percy said stiffly, standing to leave, "I *did* have Ministry business. Which has concluded."

"He really did," Harry said. "You know Percy isn't given to frivolities."

"In your tank!" Madam Pomfrey snapped. "And you, Mr. Weasley, can kindly see your way out of my infirmary!"

"Can I at least get a goodbye kiss?" Harry said. Percy glared at him, but Harry only grinned back.

"No, you may not!" Madam Pomfrey exclaimed. "The nerve! I have a mind to put a lid on that tank!"

She turned back to Percy, giving him a withering look. "Why are you still standing there? Go!"

"Apologies," Percy said, glancing at Harry one last time. Harry had obediently sank into the water, and was watching him through heavily lidded eyes. Percy felt himself blushing again,

and quickly walked away before Madam Pomfrey started chasing him out with a broom.

“Please don’t tell anyone,” he heard Harry say quietly. “It’s my fault, honestly.”

“Mr. Evans, I just witnessed you fight off the Giant Squid. I cannot imagine what you would do to protect that young man. And who on earth would I tell? Do you think so little of me? Spare me from dramatic teenagers! Why did I agree to work here...”

Percy shut the doors behind him, his heart racing. They had been caught. He had been caught in a compromising position. He was torn between going back to Harry, and running away. He could lose his job. The *Daily Prophet* would drag Harry through the mud. He had been so stupid, so careless.

Percy leaned against a wall, covering his face, ashamed of himself. Harry had almost died, multiple times, and he was worried about his reputation?

Harry was alive. He was severely injured, but he was *alive*. He was strong, stronger than anyone Percy had ever met. He wasn’t ashamed to be who he was. He wasn’t ashamed of Percy. Harry hadn’t even blamed him for all the torment he had experienced.

Percy took a shaky breath, brushed the rest of his tears away, and composed himself as befitting the personal assistant of a department head.

Harry was alive. That was all that mattered. He brushed his robes down, then continued walking out of Hogwarts. The Second Task was over, but there was still work to do.

The headmaster’s office had a new addition. They were currently gathered around a rowboat, over which Bathsheda Babbling was hunched. Severus watched her coldly, wishing the blasted squid had destroyed the thing.

Babbling straightened, frowning in thought. “No student did this, Albus. Potter isn’t even in Ancient Runes.”

“Thank you, Bathsheda,” Dumbledore said. “If you could please excuse us, I would like to speak with Minerva and Severus in private.”

“Of course,” the elderly witch said, seeing herself out. Severus watched her leave, recalling the words Charity had said before he’d been summoned.

“Don’t lose your shit again.”

“Hagrid and Wilhelmina are currently examining the Giant Squid,” Dumbledore said, still peering at the runes carved into the boat. Planks had to be stripped up to find them. His son was reckless, not careless. “Both are confident she will regrow her tentacles in several years. For the time being, she will have to be fed by hand.”

Severus scoffed. If there was any justice in the world, the house-elves would be serving squid every meal for the next year.

“Remus is taking the day to return the Loch Ness Monster to her proper home,” the headmaster continued. “I believe we can agree she is not a suitable addition to the Black Lake.”

“Albus, this cannot continue,” Minerva said, her voice quavering. “What happened in that lake, that was unnatural! Never, in my life, has the Giant Squid behaved in such a manner!”

“It has been excruciatingly obvious,” Severus said, glaring at the headmaster, “that this tournament has been interfered with from the beginning.”

“Not to this extent,” McGonagall said, shaking her head. “Severus, that boy could have died!”

He looked at her, noted her genuine fear. It had, after all, been her niece trapped under the water. The damage a rogue kraken could do was untold. Harry had successfully driven her off. As horrified Severus had been to see his son in unceasing danger, he was immensely proud of him. He doubted any other student, nor many adult wizards, would have survived.

“Do you think I am unaware of that?” he said. “He was in first place. Now Potter is. That is not a coincidence.”

McGonagall gaped at him, then turned to the headmaster. “So whoever put Potter’s name in wants him to win? Whatever for?”

Dumbledore sighed. “We don’t know, Minerva. And we have no choice but to proceed with the tournament. Monty, and Harry, must attempt the Third Task.”

“We never should have held this tournament,” McGonagall murmured, sitting down heavily. She looked at the rowboat. “Someone must have kidnapped poor Nessie and put her in the lake. Why she went after Evans... and the Giant Squid! What could have compelled her to try to *kill* a student?”

“Dark magic,” Severus suggested. “Of the same nature as that used on the Goblet of Fire.”

“Clearly,” McGonagall said faintly. “And what of that?” she asked, gesturing to the boat. “I admit, what Potter did was a surprise to us all, but who would have put *blood runes* on a school rowboat? That isn’t exactly benign magic!”

“No,” Dumbledore said musingly, lacing his fingers together, “it is not. However, based on the array, I believe we can assume it was for Monty’s benefit. He was quite safe during the task. I imagine he shall be equally well-guarded during the third.”

“But who?” McGonagall asked, her face tightening with concern.

“Black,” Severus said. “It was his house-elf who...assisted...Potter with the dragon. Unlike us, he is not hampered by the rules of this asinine tournament.”

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair. “I have been told that those are, unfortunately, woven into the Goblet’s contract. I dare not meddle in them, lest the consequences fall on those we seek to protect.”

Severus sighed. “Is that all, headmaster? Pomfrey has requested my assistance in a matter.”

Dumbledore frowned, then looked at the rowboat. “Very well.”

“Pestis incendium.”

Severus smiled unnervingly as the two remaining skrewts burned alive. The smell was atrocious, and threatened to break his concentration on the flames. It was a cleansing fire, eradicating all traces of the skrewts. If Hagrid had never bred the damn things, his son’s allergy would not have been exposed. His life would be in less danger. They had all seen the otter, the Loch Ness Monster as nonsensical as that was, holding a clam.

They had seen everything through the mirrors Percy Weasley had charmed. The grindylows attacking Harry, Harry nearly boiling them alive, then the grindylows swarming Delacour. Krum transfiguring his own head into that of a shark’s, rendering himself incapable of performing any verbal magic. He had encountered no obstacles. Krum’s venture into the Black Lake was almost as boring as Potter’s, worse as it was twice as long. Silent images of water.

The skrewts continued to die, angry, burning squirrels and birds clawing at them. Turning them into nothing.

Severus recognized the spell Harry had used when killing the kelpie. It was his own creation, one he had never imagined his son using. Most assumed it was a severing charm, a powerful one cast in his son’s desperation. Ludo Bagman had announced as such, as focused on Harry’s fight through the lake as everyone else. Severus was not inclined to disabuse them of that notion.

Once all vestige of the skrewts had been wiped from existence, Severus bent his focus to recalling the Fiendfyre. It was hungry, relentless in its desire for destruction, but Severus had a strong will. He put his wand away, not bothering to erase the evidence. He grinned as he imagined Hagrid’s grief, sifting through the ash, crying over his dead skrewts.

Severus sighed, the tightness in his chest loosening slightly. Pomfrey had no idea how long Harry would be in the hospital wing, floating in a tank brimming with dilute potions. He could not cover up all of Harry’s tracks—the boat was already in the headmaster’s possession—but there were still things he could do for his son.

Severus closed his eyes, then took flight.

The world had become psychedelic. Severus saw so much more, farther, wider. He perceived so much more, though many of those things were only of interest to a bird. Insects, other birds, in scintillating colors.

He flapped his wings, the muscles stiff after months of disuse. Severus had neglected to exercise his animagus form. He stayed under the trees, occasionally alighting on a branch to rest.

Getting out of Hogwarts was too easy. He flew right over the gates, dove down to shelter under bushes, acting as much like a bird as he could. Pausing, cocking his head, hopping, flicking his tail. He even tried a few chirps.

Severus gradually made his way to Hogsmeade, coming to rest on a fence. No one paid attention to him. His feathers made him almost invisible against the weathered wood. He did not linger on the fence, knowing it would be unusual for a bird. He flitted around Hogsmeade, landing on branches, windowsills, roofs. Searching, until he found her.

Rita Skeeter had rented a room at the Three Broomsticks, all the better to gather gossip for the rag she wrote for. Her robes strobed with color as she moved, her nails flashing like polished claws. Severus watched her from a roof across the street, then silently soared into her window when her back was turned. He closed his bird eyes, returning to his human form.

He stunned her before she turned around, levitating Skeeter into a chair, ropes winding tightly around her. He didn't know where her photographer was, but he doubted Skeeter would share a room with him. With a wave of his wand, the curtain was drawn over the window, the door was locked, the room was silenced. Severus found another chair and sat down across from Skeeter. He scanned the room. Clothing, parchment, green quills, a pair of omnioculars, copies of the *Daily Prophet*, *Witch Weekly*, *Spellbound*, the *New York Ghost*.

Charity had offered to buy him a drink. Instead, he was doing this.

Sighing, Severus took a vial of Veritaserum from his robes.

“*Rennervate.*”

Skeeter gasped. Now that he had his regular eyes back, Severus saw she was wearing vermillion robes, and her long nails were varnished electric purple. It took a moment for her eyes to focus on him.

“What are you—”

“*Legilimens.*”

Severus could not wipe the look of distaste away as he stepped into the hospital wing. Skeeter was a trove of nasty little tidbits. Harry had done an admirable job of obliterating all traces of her animagus ability from her mind. He took everything, except the knowledge she obtained while eavesdropping as a beetle. Severus paved over those holes, relying on her other means of acquiring information. The omnioculars, through which she had viewed the Second Task. Lingered on Potter, on Granger, zooming in on their mouths. The woman had already composed an article. Her quills, imbued with her repellent personality, did most of the work.

“There you are,” Pomfrey said from her office. “I was tempted to call Pomona!”

“That will be unnecessary,” Severus said, suppressing his disgust. He had to go through her omnioculars, deleting recordings Skeeter no longer remembered, altering a few things she had already written. That had taken longer than reorganizing her mind. He hadn’t returned to Hogwarts until after curfew.

“How is he?”

Pomfrey sighed. “The potions aren’t as effective with the gillyweed still at work. Hopefully it will wear off in a few days. Evans is in for quite a boring time. I’ve put him to sleep for the time being. The boy keeps trying to jump out of his tank!”

Severus nodded, then began reviewing Pomfrey’s work. They had to check the reaction gillyweed had with every ingredient in the potions Harry had taken, then any combination of those ingredients. Even with their combined experience, it was a long, tedious process.

Hours passed. Pomfrey excused herself to get some rest. Severus gathered his work, rubbing his temples. He left her office, walking to where Harry was sleeping. He noted with amusement that Pomfrey had conjured a lid for his tank. Harry’s cat was sleeping on top of it. He was also asleep, floating sedately in a cocktail of potions. He still had webbing and gills. His son almost looked vulnerable, if not for the scowl he wore.

Severus closed his eyes. He had papers to grade, not that the students cared. He had lessons to teach in the morning. He couldn’t remember which class was first. His son was out of the lake, but not out of danger. The damage to his body had been extensive.

He grimaced, then opened his eyes again.

“What are you doing here, Potter?”

Severus looked over, to where Potter was peeking through the curtains. The boy had taken to carrying his invisibility cloak everywhere, though he was not presently wearing it.

“I know Madam Pomfrey said no visitors,” Potter said quietly, stepping all the way through. He looked nervously at Severus, then faced the tank. “I wanted to make sure he was okay.”

“He is not,” Severus said. “No one could be after such a gauntlet.”

“Is he in a coma again?” Potter asked worriedly.

“No, simply an enchanted sleep.”

“Oh.” Potter took a step closer. The cat woke up, sniffed at him, then fell back asleep. “Uh, why does he still look like a fish?”

Sighing, Severus motioned for Potter to sit down. “I shall explain the various interactions gillyweed has with other potions ingredients. First, what are the ingredients of a Calming Draught?”

Kettle of Fish

Chapter Summary

March 1995

Chapter Notes

Tim Roth passed on the role of Snape. Imagine what could have been.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Good news, Mr. Evans.”

Harry gave Madam Pomfrey a blank look. She looked greenish and wavy through the potioned water of his tank. It had been over a week since the Second Task, and he was sick to death of being suspended in water. Madam Pomfrey had rejected his request for a larger tank, as she didn’t want him moving around and aggravating his injuries.

He wanted out.

Harry surfaced briefly to respond.

“Did you find out what’s wrong?”

“We did indeed,” Madam Pomfrey said, sitting down in the slightly damp chair next to his tank. Despite the promise of *good news*, she didn’t seem very happy. “Professor Snape tells me has warned you in the past about using multiple potions. Is that correct, Mr. Evans?”

Harry closed his eyes in annoyance. It had been after the Quidditch World Cup, when he had blacked out after taking too much Insomnolence Draught. And a few Wakemeups. And an Invigoration Potation. Maybe two. He had been made to write an essay on the interaction between impundulu blood and rosemary oil.

“In the future, you will speak to me before using multiple potions.”

“It’s the impundulu blood, isn’t it,” Harry said flatly. “But I took that potion days before I had the gillyweed.”

Madam Pomfrey huffed. “That potion is effective for a month.”

Harry sank back into the water. He needed to breathe. It failed to drown out his thoughts, as he had hoped.

Impundulu were shapeshifters. Vampiric, nocturnal shapeshifters. Harry did not know how his dad refined the blood before using it in his potion, but he did know it amplified the effects of other potions. Certain stimulants. Gillyweed, apparently.

What an exciting new discovery.

“The gillyweed should wear off in a month,” Madam Pomfrey finished.

A month. He was going to be stuck like this for a month.

Harry rose out of the water again, shutting down his rising fury. “But we’ve got gobstones preliminaries.”

Madam Pomfrey did not care about gobstones preliminaries. “I doubt you can play gobstones in your present state, Mr. Evans.”

He looked at his webbed hands. The webbing had retreated slightly from the tips of his fingers, but still went up to his first knuckle. She was right. His dexterity was fucked. He had to wrap his entire hand around his wand, like a baby learning how to use a spoon. Holding a quill was a struggle. He went back under the water, crossing his arms to hide his flipper hands.

“How am I supposed to write essays?” he asked. His words came out in useless bubbles.

“You have been excused from classwork,” Madam Pomfrey said, her words muffled by the water. “You could, of course, dictate your essays, but Madam Pince will not allow any library books underwater. Your ability to research would be rather restricted, I’m afraid.”

Harry floated up, keeping his gills underwater but his mouth free. It wasn’t a comfortable position, as water kept getting into his nose. “I can charm them waterproof.”

“It’s the principle of the matter,” Madam Pomfrey said firmly. “As I’ve said, you professors and headmaster have agreed to excuse your classwork while you are here. Try to think of this as a holiday.”

“A holiday,” Harry repeated dully.

“You will be allowed visitors,” Madam Pomfrey said, as if it were any consolation. “There have been several requests.”

Harry grimaced, sinking fully back under. He didn’t want to see anyone. He felt awful, disgusting, pathetic. It was his own fault. If he had planned more, been faster, had got more sleep. If he was stronger, smarter, better.

He shook his head. “Just tell them I’m contagious or something,” he mouthed.

Madam Pomfrey scoffed. "I'm not going to make your excuses for you! I never took you for vain, Mr. Evans."

Harry snorted. It had nothing to do with vanity. He just wanted to be alone.

Monty smiled at the note Sirius had sent him. His eagle owl, Aquila, was a delight as always, striking fear in the hearts of professors around the world as the bearer of Howlers. She didn't make many deliveries to him, as Monty could talk to Sirius through his two-way mirror any time he wanted, but it would be suspicious if they didn't send owls to each other at all. And it was a good message. Sirius was confirming he would be in Hogsmeade the next day.

Monty had yet to tell his friends he planned on meeting with Sirius alone. He wanted an adult, someone like a parent, to talk to. Remus was great, but he was busy with teaching, and had to cope with being a werewolf. It took a physical toll on him, every month. Monty always felt guilty adding to that burden.

He folded the note back up, tucking it away before Hermione or Ron got nosy. Neville never pried, unless he thought it was really important. He was less stressful to be around. Ron was acting weird again; apparently being Monty's *best friend* precluded someone else existing who he would miss more. That *Luna* had been chosen was salt on the wound. Hermione was also being annoying, asking him about how he had done the Second Task, where he had learned the spells he used, saying he shouldn't have *stolen* a school boat without permission, on and on. Monty thought part of it was her not wanting to deal with Ron also being weird about her being Krum's hostage.

Did they think he had *asked* for any of this? That he *wanted* to be in the Triwizard Tournament at all? It wasn't his fault, and he was sick of feeling like he was responsible for it.

The *EVANS RULES* badges had experienced a drop in popularity, as so many students were fond of the Giant Squid and didn't like to see her get hurt. It upset Monty, since he knew Harry *also* hadn't wanted to be in the tournament, and he'd been really hurt already by the time the Giant Squid showed up. She had been crushing him to death! What was he supposed to have done? Asked her nicely?

The Slytherins, however, hadn't stopped. As Monty approached the door to the potions classroom, it was almost refreshing to see the rainbow badges lighting up the dungeon corridor. However, his mood soured when the Slytherins started laughing, and Pansy Parkinson threw a magazine at Hermione.

Someone had brought his things from his dormitory, those that could be accessed. A few books. His wireless. His dad had got around the hexes that kept Adrian at bay.

“But I’m a parasite...”

Trying to write on parchment in ink underwater was a challenge. It had kept him occupied for a few days. At first, he had tried to charm everything waterproof, but that made the parchment repel the ink.

“Tell me, are you a badfish too?”

He could get out of his tank and conjure a blob of water around his head, but Madam Pomfrey wasn’t afraid to put a lid on his tank. He needed to be in a constant wash of dilute potions, to keep him sedate and reduce his pain.

Harry then had the idea to make a bubble of air inside his tank. It kept everything nice and dry, and was far simpler than trying to layer on charms to make underwater writing work. When he reflected on his time in the Black Lake, Harry recalled the merpeople carved images in stone. He didn’t know if they had a writing system, and didn’t know how Mermish could even be converted into a script. The book on Mermish he’d found in the library was filled with pictograms and screeching.

“I swim, but I wish I never learned. The water’s too polluted with germs.”

He signed off the letter to Killian, rolled the parchment up, and carefully guided the bubble out of the water. Lady Madeleine would eventually show up to carry his missive away, once Killian had returned from Hogsmeade. Harry didn’t doubt Killian needed the break. O.W.L.s were a few short months away.

Harry trusted his vice-captain could handle team meetings, but he still sent daily messages to be read to the team. Like his grandmother, he was there in spirit.

The players, especially the younger ones, needed that. They were kids who didn’t quite fit into Slytherin. Kids with Death Eater parents who had fallen from grace. Halfbloods, mudbloods. Those from blood traitor families. Children of disowned squibs. Kids who struggled with spellwork, with writing essays. Students who just needed a break from the common room, from the vitriol of the rest of the school.

Gobstones helped Harry think. It kept his hands busy, like Jasmine had with her various crafts, like Cassius and his divination paraphernalia.

Harry missed it. He missed having fun.

“Hello, Harry.”

Harry blinked a few times, hiding a grimace as his third eyelids contracted. He waved at the wireless, and it clicked off.

“Hey, Luna,” he replied, twisting in the water so he faced her. Harry didn’t admonish her for breaking into the infirmary. Luna looked subdued, like a wilted sunflower. *“Why aren’t you*

in Hogsmeade?”

Luna’s lip quivered, and for a terrible moment Harry worried she would start crying. Instead, she dug around her rucksack, pulled out a magazine, and dropped it into his tank.

Harry grabbed the magazine, frowning as he forced an Impervius Charm on it. It was a struggle, without his wand, but casting Sectumsempra wandlessly had broken a dam. He knew he had only been successful as his life was at risk. Same with the Calming Draught when he was faced with the Hungarian Horntail. But it was coming easier to him, wandless magic, now that he had cast such an intense spell.

He glanced at Luna, who had her face pressed to the side of the tank, watching him anxiously. Harry looked at the magazine. It was *Witch Weekly*. The cover featured a witch with a mess of curls, smiling toothily as she pointed her wand at a sponge cake. Puzzled, Harry flipped through the magazine. Did Luna want him to bake her a cake?

There, featured on the center spread, was a color photograph of his brother. A still photograph, to prevent him from leaving the frame in protest.

MONTY POTTER’S SECRET HEARTACHE

Harry searched for the author and felt a hot spike of rage when he saw it had been written by Rita Skeeter. His anger grew as he read.

Skeeter, of course, brought up Monty being an orphan, *deprived of love*, which was so full of shit Harry didn’t know where to begin. Their mother’s love lived in Monty’s very blood, and Harry loved his brother, even if he could never tell him. Skeeter once again claimed Hermione was his brother’s girlfriend, a laughable statement given the strain their friendship had been put under. Skeeter made fifteen-year-old, swotty Hermione out to be some sort of starfucker, which was doubly vile as she was *fifteen*. Of course, writing about Hermione’s frequent complaints about Viktor Krum, known to all who stepped foot in the library, wouldn’t work as a feature.

Numerous students had been quoted, including some from his own house. Pansy Parkinson had plenty to say, insulting Hermione’s appearance and accusing her of brewing love potions. Reading that made Harry sick; while the rumors of him potioning Cedric had died down again, he had not forgotten them, nor the low opinion people in other houses had of him.

The article didn’t stop there. No, Skeeter had to drag someone else into it.

Despite this betrayal from a close friend, Monty has found a new love at Hogwarts. Luna Lovegood, a pureblood Ravenclaw ingénue, has captured Monty’s heart.

Harry gripped the pages, which threatened to slip from his fingers. Skeeter had dug up what she could. Luna sitting at the Gryffindor table, Monty going to the Yule Ball with Luna, Monty rescuing her from the Black Lake. The remainder of the article was devoted to how *different* Luna was. Her taste in clothes and jewelry. How frequently she *lost* her belongings; Harry had long since put an end to the theft, though he had no idea if it had started up again. Her sleepwalking. Her dad owning *The Quibbler*. The creatures she spoke of, creatures others couldn't see or treated as fantasy.

Why would Monty associate with such a strange, unstable girl? What, dear readers, could possibly be behind this sudden attraction?

The water around Harry began to boil, and he squeezed his eyes shut. It was horrible, sucking in hot water to breathe, but he did it anyway. Harry released the copy of *Witch Weekly*, grabbed the side of his tank, and lifted himself out.

"I'm so sorry, Luna," he said, pulling the younger girl into a hug. He knew he was soaking wet, and only wearing shorts and his binder, but he didn't care. She needed a hug. Luna already put up with bullying at Hogwarts. She didn't need it coming from adults. Her arms were like a vice around him, almost painful as she hugged him back.

"When did this come out?" Harry asked.

Luna sniffed. "Yesterday. It's all anyone's been talking about."

"Is that why you didn't go to Hogsmeade?"

Luna shook her head. "Monty wanted to visit with his godfather. They already had it planned."

Harry sighed. "You couldn't go with Ginny? Or Neville?"

She shook her head again. "Ginny doesn't like me anymore."

He didn't press about Neville. It was possible Neville hadn't wanted to go, or was meeting his grandmother, or was going with other fourth years. It was so easy to make someone feel excluded, even unintentionally. And maybe Luna also needed a break from constantly being around others. It was nice to be in an empty castle.

"I can't imagine this is bigger news than me killing a kelpie with my bare hands," Harry said, releasing Luna and easing himself back into the water. "Or maiming the Giant Squid."

Luna's eyes welled with tears. "Some people say it's because the Giant Squid doesn't like muggleborns."

"Fuck's sake," Harry muttered. "She's saved muggleborns from drowning. That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard." He glanced at the magazine floating near him. "Besides a

Skeeter article.”

He knew his dad had done *something* to Skeeter. It would have been too suspicious if the woman stopped writing scandalous articles completely, and she wasn’t entirely bad. She had written plenty of articles critical of the Ministry, of the ICW, of prominent public figures. That she did not hesitate to do the same about Hogwarts students only demonstrated Skeeter didn’t care who she threw under the bus, so long as someone was getting run over.

Harry dipped his head down again, thinking. Luna’s father owned *The Quibbler*, and Harry could see him publishing an article claiming Rita Skeeter was part of the Rotfang Conspiracy. No doubt, if he told Mr. Lovegood Skeeter was an animagus he would run with it. But it would also make his livelihood and his daughter fair game to Skeeter.

He wished Skeeter would just go away.

“How’s Monty holding up?” he asked

Luna, who was now damp, had been wiping away her tears. Her eyes began watering again.

“He’s really angry.”

Monty could not get rid of Ron and Hermione fast enough. He had no idea how Skeeter had done it, probably snooping around as an animagus, but somehow she had learned Krum had asked Hermione to visit him over the summer. It felt like whatever had been brewing between her and Ron since the Yule Ball was on the verge of boiling over. It didn’t help that they’d lost points for reading the magazine in class, or that Monty had lost points for eavesdropping on Karkaroff and Snape. It was very weird. Karkaroff had stormed into the middle of their potions lessons, lurked around for the entire class, then showed Snape something on his arm. While Snape had been irritated by Karkaroff, he was furious that Monty had listened in.

Monty felt guiltily glad that Hermione’s bit in the article was getting more attention than Luna’s. That the article existed at all infuriated him, but he couldn’t start cursing people in the corridors if he wanted to be a prefect. He had no idea what happened in Ravenclaw Tower, but Luna had been almost catatonic at breakfast. He hated it.

“I’m going to meet Sirius now,” he said, checking his watch. He had already spent several hours wandering around Hogsmeade with Hermione and Ron. He wished he had asked Sirius to meet earlier. “I’ll see you later.”

“Are you sure you don’t want us to come?” Hermione asked. She seemed to be under the continued impression that Sirius was dangerous. Which was fine, she had only met him a few times. And Sirius *was* dangerous. Ron was stubbornly silent; he was still upset with Sirius telling Mr. Weasley off after the Quidditch World Cup.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Monty said, hoping they didn’t follow him into the Three Broomsticks. Not that he could stop them.

He hurried inside, waving goodbye to his friends, waiting until they walked away. After a minute, Monty left again, ducking into an alley and taking side streets until he reached the Hog’s Head.

The severed pig’s head on the sign was as gruesome as Monty remembered it. It made him miss Harry, who was still in the hospital wing. No one knew what was going on with him, other than he’d been badly injured during the Second Task. Monty was glad he had snuck in and got an explanation right away. And he’d learned a lot about gillyweed. Snape wasn’t exactly *nice*, but he could be civil. He’d even let Monty help out with some of the preparations for Wolfsbane.

Snape had also given him a warning, that if anyone asked it was Sirius who had enchanted the rowboat. Monty had asked Sirius straightaway, who had readily agreed to take the blame. Monty assumed it was all to keep Harry from getting in trouble, but he hadn’t told Sirius that. Not that Sirius minded, always up for causing mayhem.

The inside of the Hog’s Head was as dark, smoky, and sticky as Monty remembered. Sirius was sitting by himself at the bar, wearing a jacket made out of black dragonhide, alternating between taking sips of firewhiskey and smoking his cigarette, staring into space despondently. Sirius looked up at the sound of the door opening, and his face broke out into a sunny smile. When Monty reached the bar, Sirius pulled him into a hug.

“It’s good to see you, kid,” he said, grinding his cigarette out.

“Yeah, it’s been a while,” Monty said. The elderly man who ran the Hog’s Head, who Harry claimed was Dumbledore’s brother, grunted and set a bottle of butterbeer on the bar.

“Thanks,” Monty said, watching as the old man went into the back.

“Come on, let’s get a table,” Sirius said, standing up. “There’s plenty to choose from.”

Monty followed him to a murky corner, and relaxed when Sirius cast a silencing charm.

“Sorry I couldn’t make it to the Second Task,” Sirius said.

“It’s alright,” Monty said. Sirius had already apologized to him, but Monty really didn’t mind. It had been a boring Second Task for him. Sirius was busy meeting with different people on the Wizengamot, trying to get enough votes to oust Dolores Umbridge. It wasn’t going as well as Sirius had hoped; Umbridge was one of the Minister’s favorites, supposedly. Not only that, but Sirius was still trying to get the Goblet of Fire investigated, even when everyone kept telling him it was hopeless. *He* hadn’t forgotten that someone else had put Monty’s name in.

“How’s Evans?” Sirius asked.

Monty shrugged. Snape had been parsimonious about Harry's actual condition, which oddly made Monty respect him more. He wasn't spreading information without Harry's permission.

"Still in the hospital wing," Monty said.

Sirius took out another cigarette and lit it, making sure to direct the smoke away from Monty. "From what you told me, sounds like he's lucky to be alive."

Monty nodded, though he didn't think *luck* had anything to do with it.

"There's something I wanted to talk about," Monty said. He had already told Sirius about how Bagman kept offering him incredibly specific advice, and Sirius had told him Crouch had sent his own son to Azkaban. He had also sent Sirius to Azkaban, without a trial. Monty wished Sirius had told him that months ago, but Sirius didn't like talking about Azkaban, or what he had witnessed when he was in there.

"Yeah?" Sirius prompted.

Monty explained what he had seen in potions between Karkaroff and Snape, about how Karkaroff claimed Snape was avoiding him. Their whole interaction had sat poorly with Monty.

Sirius took a long drag from his cigarette and slowly exhaled. "I've wondered why Dumbledore hired him. You know, Snape ran with baby Death Eaters when we were in school. Makes sense he would know Karkaroff. No idea what could be on his arm, though."

"Snape knew Death Eaters?" Monty asked. He wasn't surprised to hear it, but it was... disappointing.

"To be fair, everyone in Slytherin did," Sirius said. "But he's also been obsessed with the Dark Arts for as long as I've known him. Nearly all his friends turned out to be Death Eaters." Sirius took a sip of his firewhiskey, his eyes growing distant. "Rosier, Wilkes, the Lestranges, Mulciber, Avery..."

Monty's stomach dropped further. He recognized those names from school, as students in Slytherin. On the quidditch team. On the gobstones team.

"Were there any women Death Eaters?" Monty asked.

Sirius blinked, then looked at him. "Yeah. Why do you ask?"

"I was just curious," Monty said. "It would be weird if there weren't."

"Not many, now that I think of it," Sirius said. "My cousin Bellatrix, she's still in Azkaban. Róisín Avery, she claimed to be under Imperius I think. Maybe Jodie Pritchard."

"Bellatrix?" Monty prompted.

Sirius chuckled darkly. “Kreacher could tell you all about her. She’d already graduated from Hogwarts by the time I started. Merlin, sometimes I can still hear her laughing in her cell...”

Monty uncorked his butterbeer, narrowing his eyes in thought. He could tell Sirius was starting to spiral, though, as he had begun mumbling to himself and had already lit another cigarette. Monty reached into his robes, then pulled out the magazine he had nicked off of Hermione.

“Sirius, could you look at this?”

Chapter End Notes

[Badfish](#) was playing on the wireless

Poor Figure

Chapter Summary

March 1995

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Monty was glad the weekend was over and he had classes to distract him again. Luna had confessed to breaking into the hospital wing to visit Harry while he was at Hogsmeade. Monty was just glad she was talking again. She was one of his best friends, and he felt helpless. How could he prevent Skeeter from hurting her?

Luna hadn't stopped sitting with him during meals, despite all the pointing and laughing. She was used to people laughing at her, and Monty was used to people staring at him. He hated it, but he was used to it.

He looked up at the sound of wings, smiling when he saw one owl arrive before the rest. It was Aquila, the imperious eagle owl, who looked like death on wings as she flew towards the head table. Dumbledore stood, as if to intercept her, but Aquila wasn't delivering the smoking Howler to Dumbledore. Instead, she dove at Flitwick.

Flitwick shrieked and covered his head, running from the Great Hall. Aquila gave chase, swooping down to harass Flitwick. The Howler exploded before he reached the doors.

FLITWICK, Sirius' voice boomed, so loud it shook the crockery. Monty picked up his tea so it wouldn't spill. The Howler chased after Flitwick. *IF A SINGLE HAIR ON LUNA'S HEAD*

The doors slammed shut, cutting off the rest of Sirius' speech.

"Daddy doesn't read *Witch Weekly*," Luna said quietly. "I haven't told him about it."

Monty sighed. While Mr. Lovegood was a nice person, and loved Luna, he wasn't exactly all together. Luna largely took care of herself, and to some extent her dad. Monty couldn't recall Luna ever going to her dad about the bullying, and he suspected it was because she didn't want to trouble him. Luna herself had a fairly indifferent attitude towards the comments people made about her, and even when they took her belongings. She had more important things to concern herself with.

Someone had to look out for her.

The regular post came, and Monty was surprised to see a number of owls approaching Hermione, and a few dropping letters off for Luna. Luna took her wand from behind her ear and burned the letters on sight.

“What are you doing?” Hermione snapped, opening letters as quickly as she could and shooing the growing flock of owls away. She scowled at one letter and handed it to Monty. It looked like a ransom note, made of letters cut out of newspapers and pasted together. Monty picked up another that Hermione tossed aside. The letters were mean-spirited, calling Hermione names, telling her to go back to the muggle world, even going so far as to call her a mudblood. Monty didn’t want anyone like that...defending his virtue, or whatever the hell they were thinking. His life was none of their business. Neither was Luna’s, or Hermione’s, or even Viktor Krum’s.

“Daddy gets a lot of letters like that,” Luna said sagely, immolating another letter before leaning over Monty’s arm to read. “They are very rude. Sometimes they’re cursed.”

“Cursed?” Hermione asked, just as she was opening another envelope. She gave a startled scream, dropping it immediately. Thick, pale green pus had gushed out, coating her hands. Monty was immediately hit with the smell of petrol, so strong it made his eyes water. Undiluted bubotuber pus. Huge, yellow, painful looking boils began breaking out on Hermione’s hands. She hurried off to the hospital wing, chased by more owls until someone cast a net around them. Monty looked at the head table and saw Professor McGonagall standing up, her expression grim. Monty hoped she was imagining Sirius sending her a Howler too.

Monty milled about the grounds, looking for a place to hide his leprechaun gold. Professor Grubbly-Plank had brought a niffler in for their class, and had challenged each of them to hide the gold as best as they could. A few people had to be told off for trying to pocket the gold, and Grubbly-Plank had looked annoyed at having to explain leprechaun gold eventually vanished. Monty had tried telling that to Ron during the Quidditch World Cup, but his friend had been too obsessed with gathering as much gold as he could. Monty could only imagine what Ron felt like when it all disappeared.

“Five minutes until I release her!”

Neville nearly bowled him over, running around wildly to find a good spot. Monty was tempted to stick his own coin in his pocket, but didn’t want to niffler to mug him. In the end, Monty chucked it into the Black Lake. He walked back to join the rest of the class as they gathered around the caged niffler. She was a chubby, mole-like creature with big eyes and fluffy black fur. Amusingly, the niffler was attempting to shove the gold cage into her pouch, and made angry chittering sounds when she couldn’t. As soon as she was released, the niffler

dove into the ground with extraordinary ease. She swam through the earth like a dolphin in water, rising up triumphantly whenever she found a coin.

As the niffler hunted for their coins, Professor Grubbly-Plank lectured. Niffler pouches, which could contain vast amounts of treasure, their attraction to all things shiny, and how relentless they were in their pursuit.

Hermione didn't return from the infirmary until near the end of class. Her hands were wrapped in heavy bandages, and she looked miserable. Monty was tempted to ask if she had seen Harry, but thought better of it.

"You missed a great lesson," Monty said as they walked back to the castle. He had won a bar of Honeydukes chocolate since the niffler had never found his coin. Of course, several Slytherins accused him of cheating, and Ron seemed put out that Monty hadn't told him that nifflers were bad swimmers. "Right, Ron?"

Ron sighed. "Wish I had a niffler."

Monty and Hermione exchanged a look.

"You heard what Professor Grubbly-Plank said," Monty said. "They make bad pets."

Ron was quiet as they walked to the Great Hall. It wasn't until lunch began to be served that he spoke again.

"I hate being poor."

Monty shut his eyes impatiently. He never knew how to respond when Ron said something like that.

One of the first things Ron had talked to him about, after asking to see his scar, was how poor his family was. Monty thought nothing of it at the time, but Ron brought up his family's poverty enough that it had reminded Monty of that moment. Ron complaining about being poor, properly dressed with a lunch packed by his mum, while Monty wore broken glasses and Dudley's oversized castoffs, the sound of Uncle Vernon's cruel laughter still ringing in his ears.

Hermione had also begun complaining. She was struggling to use a fork with her bandaged hands, and was growling about Rita Skeeter.

Ron was still going on about nifflers and leprechaun gold and Fred and George selling trick wands and Canary Creams. Monty was tempted to tell him to shut up, or say that he hated having dead parents, or that anyone with a room filled with Chudley Cannons merchandise, who had clothing that fit, who had never gone hungry a day in his life, was *not* poor.

Monty piled roast beef and Yorkshire pudding on his plate and didn't say anything.

Harry had perfected the art of blowing rings of bubbles. He did have to use actual air, which his lungs were no longer equipped to handle. It made it a bit trickier. Madam Pomfrey had relented and made his tank larger, tall enough that he could stand upright without surfacing, with room to spare. She refused to add any aquarium features, so Harry had to make do on his own.

He had nothing but time on his hands. In an ideal world, he would have access to the library, but Madam Pince wouldn't budge. His dad had been kind enough to bring his entire trunk, so Harry had access to his own small library, and his dad had lent books of his own.

But, there was more to magic than reading. There was *doing* magic.

There weren't many charms Harry could practice, since changing the quality of the water would interfere with the potions Madam Pomfrey dumped in. He could, however, do transfiguration.

Harry was thus caught in a rather embarrassing situation. Monty walked in on him as a parade of small animals transfigured from water—weasels, lions, owls, squirrels, hedge sparrows, and a snake—cavorted above the tank, dancing and bobbing as Harry conducted them. Harry's concentration broke when he noticed Monty, who looked amazed by the sight.

"That was wicked!" Monty whispered, shutting the curtain behind him. Harry was too surprised to be properly embarrassed. He had told only Monty and Luna how to get past the barrier set up around him. He didn't want anyone else showing up out of the blue to sneak a peek. He was getting letters from his friends, mostly Astrid, who had apparently shaved her head again, and Cassius, who was keeping him in the loop regarding school work. Even if he wasn't obligated to do any, Harry still needed to know what might be on exams.

Harry pulled himself to the surface, propping himself on the edge of the tank

"What's up?" he asked, holding a hand out. He did his best to form the water into something resembling a small Hedwig, but the water animals were more impressionistic. Blob-like. He wasn't an artist like Luna, but he knew what an owl looked like. Basically.

"Aren't you supposed to be in Divination?" he asked, using a charm to raise the water-owl out of his tank.

Monty stared at the water-owl, his eyes sparkling. Harry hid a smile; he hoped magic never stopped being wonderful for his brother.

"What?" Monty said absently. "Oh, yeah. I skived off. Said I was sick."

"Why?"

Monty frowned, then pulled a chair over and sat down.

"You should try summoning it next time," Harry suggested. Monty gave him a startled look. "Wandless summoning is really useful for potions. You don't have to leave the cauldron to

get something you forget.”

“Okay,” Monty said, still frowning. “How long are you going to be here?”

“Another fortnight,” Harry said, letting the little owl fall back into the water. “You didn’t answer me about Divination.”

Monty’s frown deepened. “You know about that article?”

“Yeah,” Harry said slowly.

“Luna and Hermione have been getting a lot of hate mail, Hermione especially,” Monty said. “People have even sent Howlers.”

“I’ve heard,” Harry said. He had got to hear Sirius Black’s Howler echoing throughout the first floor. Sirius was not shy about implicating himself when listing his former professors’ failures, and all the things they let students get away with. Harry imagined it looked a lot different as an adult.

“Ron’s been acting weird again,” Monty continued. “Since he found out Krum invited Hermione to Bulgaria. And Hermione’s been going to the library a lot, I’ve seen her in there with Krum. I think she’s trying to do something about Rita Skeeter, which Ron thinks is a bad idea. So now they’re arguing about that too.”

Harry dropped back down to breathe, and to give himself a moment to respond. It wasn’t as if his own friends didn’t get into arguments. Astrid would be too hard on Adrian, Cassius, and Terence about quidditch practice. Adrian would make a bad joke. Cassius would be too blunt, or too critical. Jasmine would complain about how everyone else was acting. Phoebe checked out a lot, and lost track of conversations. Terence tried to be the mediator, and wasn’t as committed to arguing as the rest of them. Harry would just leave if he became too upset, which got him accused of running away. He was the one they all went to for a third opinion, and he hated being put in that awkward position. Some things just weren’t worth fighting over. Cassius and Jasmine could be extremely pedantic. They’d end up going in circles, or spend ages looking up definitions if someone used a term one of them objected to.

“What do you mean, *do something about Skeeter*?” Harry asked, focusing on the thing he had the best chance of resolving.

“Hermione thinks she’s doing something illegal to eavesdrop,” Monty explained.

“I doubt it,” Harry said. There were plenty of legal ways to spy. “She *is* an animagus, by the way. A green beetle.”

Monty’s eyes popped open. “But that’s—”

“Illegal, yeah,” Harry said, grinning. “Don’t worry about it, I’ve told the professors.” He had told *one* professor, but he assumed his dad had disseminated the information. If not, Skeeter couldn’t remember anyway.

Monty relaxed. “Can I tell Hermione that? Maybe it’ll get her to stop.”

Harry was quiet a moment, regretting he had mentioned the animagus thing at all. It would be problematic if it got back to Skeeter.

“I’m sorry, Monty,” Harry said, “I don’t trust Granger.”

Monty deflated. “Yeah. She’s been talking about catching Skeeter in the act.”

“What about Weasley?” Harry asked. He considered writing Percy, or perhaps threatening Fred and George, to help Ron get his shit together, but based on what he knew Ron was the sort to learn things the hard way.

Monty made a face, then shook his head. “It’s one of those things where most of the time it’s fine, but then he’ll say something that rubs me the wrong way.”

“Like what?” Harry asked.

Monty shifted uncomfortably. “Like the stuff he says about giants, and house-elves.” Monty hesitated, then added, “And him complaining about being poor.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. He knew the Weasleys weren’t the best off financially, and he knew that Percy blamed himself for that. It wasn’t something they had talked about in depth, though Harry wanted to shake Percy around for such an objectively wrong opinion. Ron was the only one who complained about being poor, to Harry’s knowledge. Just because everything wasn’t brand new didn’t mean they were poor, but Harry had heard Draco Malfoy mock the Weasleys enough times to know it was something that easily set Ron off.

Monty had brought up Ron’s jealousy in the past. It had almost completely destroyed their friendship before the First Task. Harry honestly had no idea what to do about it, and it irritated him that his brother had to deal with friend drama in addition to the Triwizard Tournament. True, he had literally sailed through the Second Task, but there was still a third one to survive.

“He’s allowed to complain about things,” Harry offered.

“I know that,” Monty said irritably. “But does it have to be to *me*?”

“You’re friends, right?” Harry said, smiling slightly. “Sometimes people just want to vent.”

Monty scowled, then looked around. There wasn’t much to see. A trunk stacked with books and Lady Madeleine. A very large tank fit for a sixteen-year-old fish boy. A chair, currently occupied by Monty.

“Are other people visiting you?” he asked.

“Just you, Luna, Professor Snape, and Madam Pomfrey,” Harry said. “I don’t want visitors.”

Monty gave him a puzzled look. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t feel like being around anyone,” Harry said simply. “I like being alone.”

“Should I go?” Monty asked, his brow furrowing.

“No, you don’t bother me,” Harry said. “I wouldn’t have told you how to get in if you did.”

“You don’t get lonely stuck in here?” Monty asked, looking at the tank. “Seems boring.”

“I used to go months at a time without speaking to anyone,” Harry said. He took a moment to make an attempt at a Giant Squid made of water, but only managed a few tentacles. “And there’s a difference between being lonely and being alone.”

Monty had a distant look as he thought it over.

“I know what you mean.”

Monty followed his team onto the pitch. The Gryffindor stands exploded with cheering. Dean had made a sign that read *HOUSE OF THE CHAMPION*, which he and Seamus were holding up from either end. Monty felt a spike of annoyance and embarrassment. Quidditch was the one thing he had actually earned from the beginning. Monty didn’t mind getting praised for skills he possessed. He wished it hadn’t got mixed up with the Triwizard Tournament stuff.

It was their game against Hufflepuff. Cedric Diggory was not only the seeker for Hufflepuff, but the team captain. Monty remembered Angelina, Katie, and Alicia drooling over Cedric Diggory in the past. Now, Alicia looked appalled by him, and when Angelina shook hands with him Diggory winced in pain at her grip. Diggory tried to smile at him, but Monty only stared back. He readjusted the strap of his goggles with a loud *snap*, then pulled his gloves on tighter, his eyes never leaving Diggory. He looked like a complete twat.

When Madam Hooch blew her whistle, Monty rose so fast his nose started to bleed. The problem with making the seeker the captain of the team was they could not do both at the same time. Monty hardly paid attention to the game happening around him, other than Alicia shrieking like a banshee whenever she scored a goal, which was a new development. He was too busy looking for the snitch.

There was one exception to that.

Monty shot past Diggory in a blur, leaning forward on his Firebolt, urging more speed out of it. Air rushed past him, but he could hear Lee shouting from the commentator’s stand. He didn’t dare look back to see if Cedric had taken the bait. Instead, Monty dove, hurtling towards the ground at a suicidal angle. He gritted his teeth, trusting his Firebolt wouldn’t snap under the strain when he pulled up at the last second.

He flew up, turning on a hairpin, his neck and shoulder muscles burning from the strain his body was under. There was an audible gasp from the crowd, and people began to scream. Monty looked down, and saw Diggory had indeed taken the bait, too distracted from splitting

his attention between seeking and captaining to recognize the feint, not a good enough flier to get out of the abrupt dive before it was too late.

Madam Hooch's whistle blew for a time out. Professor Sprout and Madam Pomfrey ran onto the pitch, where Cedric Diggory had dug a long trench before his broom finally shattered.

Monty landed with his team, who all seemed impressed he had pulled off a Wronski Feint, if unsettled it had happened during a school game.

"I can't believe you ploughed Diggory!" Fred said, slapping him on the back.

Monty watched as Diggory was helped off the field, injured but alive. The seeker from Ravenclaw, Cho Chang, ran out of the stands to comfort him.

Monty readjusted his goggles, then looked to the skies. He spotted the snitch near a goalpost. There was no need to further prolong the game.

"Diggory can get fucked."

Chapter End Notes

I got really distracted today, thinking about writing a fic with an asocial protagonist. I think it's hard for some people to understand, at least in my experience.

But I held back! I will persevere and focus on what is turning out to be a very long story lol

Tank Boy

Chapter Summary

March 1995

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Har—ah!”

A heinous clamor, like the sound of a thousand dying cats, exploded in the hospital wing, followed immediately by a loud *squelch* and groans of disgust. Lady Madeleine leapt into the air, her fur on end and her tail puffed out. Harry cast a silencing charm around her, then sank to the bottom of his tank. An old copy of the *Daily Prophet* floated past him. The article on the Second Task was rather boring, as it had been a rather boring event for three of the champions. His own epic battles against sea monsters of the abyss had been glossed over.

Harry suspected his dad’s hand at work, and not only for Harry’s benefit. Hogwarts had managed to keep Quirrell quiet, and the basilisk, and where Pettigrew had been hiding. A feral kraken in the lake was perhaps not as bad a look, but it was nevertheless a cause for concern. And the Giant Squid hadn’t been in her right mind. According to Luna, she had been moping at the bottom of the lake ever since.

“Mr. Diggory!” Madam Pomfrey shouted over the ongoing screeching. “What are you doing out of bed?”

“I just wanted to check on Harry,” Cedric said, his voice oddly muffled. “It’s been weeks since anyone’s seen him.”

“I’ve seen him, Mr. Diggory,” Madam Pomfrey said stiffly. “I ought to leave you like that!”

Harry smiled to himself. Anyone who tried to get past his curtains ended up embalmed in quick-hardening gobstone fluid. It was banned in most countries, but Harry had a woman on the inside.

“And Mr. Evans!” Madam Pomfrey stuck her head through the curtains. “I specifically told you *not* to use the Caterwauling Charm! It could raise the dead!”

“Sorry,” Harry mouthed with an unapologetic grin. He grabbed his wand—much easier to do now that the webbing had half retreated—and dispelled the charm.

Madam Pomfrey looked at him crossly, then whisked the curtains shut again. Harry could hear her breaking open the carapace around Cedric, complaining about the mess. Harry was

amazed she let him get away with it.

“Is he okay?” Cedric asked, once he had been freed. Harry wished he had seen what it looked like.

“That is between me and Mr. Evans,” Madam Pomfrey said firmly. “Now get back to your bed and *rest*, Mr. Diggory!”

Harry sighed, then floated to the surface. “I’m fine, Cedric.”

“Harry?” he said excitedly. “Can I come in?”

“What did I *just* say?” Madam Pomfrey snapped. “I don’t know why I bother... If you are not back in your bed within five minutes, I shall spell you into it!”

She stormed away, leaving Harry, Cedric, and some flimsy curtains that at the moment felt far too permeable.

“Well?” Cedric prompted. “Can I see you?”

“No,” Harry said.

“Alright,” Cedric said readily. Harry’s heart sank. It was hard dealing with Cedric, which was why he avoided having to do so.

“How are you?” Cedric asked. “You were really great, you know. I’ve never seen anyone do spells like that.”

“I’m fine,” Harry repeated dully. “And thanks, I guess. I heard about your crash.”

Monty had snuck into the infirmary, hours after Cedric had been carted in, to tell him about the match. Harry had no idea what had got into Monty’s head, and was surprised his little brother could be so vindictive.

Cedric chuckled. “Good thing dad paid extra for collision protection! Still, can’t believe Potter pulled off a Wronski Feint. It was mad!”

Harry nodded, though Cedric couldn’t see it. Cedric wasn’t a mean person; if he saw Harry in his present state, he wasn’t likely to spread it around. Still, the idea of Cedric looking at him at all made him uncomfortable. He had obliviated a few seconds of Cedric’s memory, but all his other thoughts and feelings about Harry had remained. It had taken longer for those to fade away, even as Cedric respected the space Harry had wanted.

There wasn’t much to say. Cedric wanted to know if he was fine, Harry was fine, Cedric was still under observation after his crash, and eventually Madam Pomfrey came back to hustle him away. It put Harry on edge, having Cedric so close when he was in such a vulnerable position. Not that he was *helpless*, most of his injuries had healed, but Harry felt very much like a specimen on display. He was tank boy.

He sank back down, feeling weightless in the water. It was one of his favorite parts about being stuck in a tank for weeks on end. Harry quite liked swimming. His dad had dropped issues of *Kerrang!* and a stack of comic books in his tank early on. Harry had no idea why he'd been in the muggle world. His dad must have had a real laugh, though, picking out *Tank Girl*.

A torn out *Daily Prophet* article drifted past Harry, buoyed by the pressure of the gobstones game he was creating. It was a game between Derek and Vincent. Harry and Killian had bowed out of the Gobstones Tournament; Killian, as he had O.W.L.s to study for, and Harry as he was badly out of practice. He also wanted to show that the entire team didn't rest on his proficiency. Every member of the Slytherin gobstones team was a force to be reckoned with, each an unstoppable berserker in a gobstones fluid-soaked trance, gobstones striking like raging meteors inside the ring of their battlefield.

The back of his tank was plastered with *get well* cards from his friends. There was a strange incidence of parallel thought, where Luna, Jasmine, and Astrid's little sister Mhairi had drawn a picture of him defeating the Giant Squid. The cards he received from Monty and Percy were hidden in his trunk. Percy had even sent him a Mars bar. Harry couldn't bring himself to eat it.

Felipe had been smuggled into the hospital wing. He was doing laps in the water, more adept at swimming than flying.

Tracey's report was stuck to the side of his tank. Harry looked at it occasionally as he conducted his orchestra, his *Wassermusik*, his magnum opus.

Astrid had sent a note along with the *Prophet* article. Wilda Griffiths, a chaser for Puddlemere United, had gone missing. Astrid suspected foul play, not of the disappearance which was a relatively common phenomenon in quidditch, but at Griffiths being lured away from the Holyhead Harpies, and to the team that Astrid's old enemy, Oliver Wood, was presently serving as reserve keeper. The disappearance had occurred after Gwenog Jones, Harpies captain and idol of Astrid's, made various death threats. Harry had already read the article. It was the latest scandal the *Daily Prophet* was capitalizing on—

"Mr. Evans, what are you doing?"

Harry looked up, squinting his eyes against the glare of his wand. Madam Pomfrey was in her dressing gown, indistinct through the dark, shifting waters.

"I've invented a new sport," Harry said. He no longer needed to emerge from the water to communicate. He had discovered a charm that changed the density of water so that it was easier to hear. "Water gobstones. I call it waterstones."

"Mr. Evans," Madam Pomfrey began.

“I have become one with the water,” Harry continued.

“Mr. Evans, it’s nearly three in the morning,” Madam Pomfrey said. Harry gave the wand she held a bemused look.

“I should take Percy to Waterstones,” he mumbled, smiling to himself.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” Madam Pomfrey muttered, somehow banishing his waterstones game. Harry dragged his hand through the water, saddened by the loss. “The gillyweed will wear off in a week.”

Harry was quiet for a moment. “What if it doesn’t?”

“It will,” Madam Pomfrey said firmly, a vial appearing in her hand. Harry watched curiously as she upended it into his tank. “Now, go to sleep!”

Curiosity killed the prat, Bozo!

Harry snorted, bubbles streaming out of his nose, as he imagined a High-Powered, Fully Automatic, Skin-Reversing Rifle-wielding Astrid saying the same to Skeeter’s photographer. He drifted listlessly through the water, the faint greenish tinge imparting the black-and-white comic with a modicum of color. Not that it needed it, the images were incredibly detailed.

He was having some rather troubling ideas, such as turning blood into mercury. It wasn’t outside the realm of possibility, but Harry doubted the library contained any information on transfiguring blood. Technically, the animals they transfigured in class were bursting with blood—he had seen quite a lot of it over the past school year—but the various parts that made up animals were part of a cohesive, transfiguratory whole. They weren’t targeting discrete parts and transfiguring those. And there was something sinister about using body parts in spellwork. They did it in potions all the time, even if the parts felt very distant from the creatures they had been harvested from.

Tank Girl raised many ethical and existential questions.

Maybe strapping the Dark Lord between two nuclear warheads would work.

Harry sighed, knowing that summoning two warheads would no doubt violate the Statute of Secrecy. He could picture the disappointment on Percy’s face. Percy was so cute when he was miffed.

Meanwhile, Thundering Obsession, armed with state of the art phallic symbols, spurts through the outback...

Harry laughed helplessly. He could not believe his dad walked into a store and purchased something like this.

Harry was drowning.

He woke up all at once, annoyed to find he had floated up to the top of his tank and was squished against the lid. Madam Pomfrey did not appreciate the fountains of questionable water shooting around the infirmary during a late night game of waterstones. She and his dad had calculated when the gillyweed would wear off, and given it was the middle of the night, clearly their calculations were off.

Harry punched the lid ineffectively, panicked, then used a spell he had been waiting to use for a month.

“Siccescentem!”

The water around him vanished, and Harry fell to the bottom of his tank, gasping for air. He hit the bottom hard, gritting his teeth as his various half-healed bone injuries flared to life. He took another shaky breath, almost wishing he was still in the water. It was filled with lovely potions, and made him forget how thoroughly damaged he had been during the Second Task.

He pushed himself up. He wanted to get out of the tank. It had abruptly become a terrarium, which was significantly worse as it lacked a water feature, or any features other than unbreakable glass and a few damp magazines. Harry pressed himself against the glass, nauseated by how hot and gross and wrong his bones felt. Every time he breathed he could feel a sharp ache in his teeth. It was awful. His lungs were used to water, and he coughed, which rattled his ribs, which made it harder to breathe, which made him cough more. It was a wretched cycle of bullshit.

He knew that unbreakable glass was resistant to breaking. It was in the name. However, during his aquatic sabbatical, Harry had developed a theory. Glass was, sometimes, a liquid like water. When it got really, really hot.

Harry pressed his trembling hands to the side of the tank. He just needed fire.

“Mr. Evans!”

Harry flinched, pulling away from the glass that was slumping away from his palms. It was beautiful, the light passing through the molten glass in a bewitching way, creating little fractures in the glass around it.

He did not have much time to marvel at the glass, as Madam Pomfrey removed the lid and levitated him out of his tank. Harry went limp as he was floated to an actual bed, a luxury he had not experienced in many weeks. It wasn't as plush as he had dreamed, as gravity was taking its toll on him.

Madam Pomfrey tutted and waved her wand. She began muttering to herself as she checked his bones.

"It's what I was afraid of," she concluded, not putting her wand away. "We'll have to vanish and regrow."

Harry closed his eyes wearily, too exhausted to protest. "Take my bones. Take them all."

"Oh, hush," Madam Pomfrey said, settling a warm blanket over him. "We'll do it after you get a bit of rest."

His arms and legs were deflated flesh balloons. Harry looked at them numbly, ignoring the fact that Madam Pomfrey was methodically vanishing his ribs. She had made him take his binder off, and he was in a foul mood. He knew it needed to be washed, since he'd been wearing it underwater, but he wasn't in a very rational or forgiving state of mind. His bones were vanishing left and right, and his dad wouldn't let him take what Harry was calling *Evans' Elixir*. His dad said it was a moronic name, but had yet to name it himself, so Harry didn't care. *Prince's Potion* had an even worse reception.

They wanted to wait another month before Harry started his treatment again, just in case any gillyweed had lingered. And he wasn't allowed to drink gillywater. Not that Harry ever did, but he didn't like adding a new item to his list of forbidden foods.

"You could've just broken them again," Harry mumbled.

"No talking," Madam Pomfrey snapped. "And we don't rebreak bones like muggles!"

Harry braced himself as best he could, then choked down three full bottles of Skele-Gro. Not the mass-produced kind, but artisanal, Hogwarts-brewed Skele-Gro. It was a vile potion, like drinking spicy, gelatinous binwater that had been set on fire. It would go great with gobstones.

Drinking the horrific concoction was nothing compared to feeling it migrate to his limbs, then the piercing torture of his bones regrowing, stretching out his skin, tendons, ligaments, muscles snapping into place. Harry bore it with dignity. Monty had gone through the same thing at twelve years old, after inveterate idiot Gilderoy Lockhart had vanished the bones in his arm. Harry viciously hoped a wendigo had finally done away with Lockhart once and for all.

Madam Pomfrey left Harry alone to his suffering, promising him that absolutely no one would be allowed to approach his bed. Harry wasn't sure what he would do if someone bothered him. He was in a very, very bad mood.

It wasn't the worst month of Harry's life, but the first and last bits sucked shit.

Harry was frowning over a highly questionable usage of *voodoo magic* in some sort of human transfiguration ritual, when his dad stepped through his curtains.

He set the comic aside, reminding himself that muggles often got facts about the magical world, and their own world, wrong. And it was a comic book. Lady Madeleine rose from his lap, stretched, yawned, and laid down again.

The Skele-Gro had done its work. Harry had brand new bones. His body still ached, and he felt weak as a newborn kitten, but he was glad to be back to mostly normal.

His dad stood at the foot of his hospital bed, his arms crossed, his face in the neutrality of occluded anger, looming.

"Hey," Harry said.

His dad's eye twitched. "You are a singularly infuriating child."

Harry regarded him coolly. "Will you teach me how to duel?"

His dad stared back. "We need to discuss how you will prevent a similar situation from occurring again."

Harry sighed, looking to the side. "That's why I'm asking. If I was faster, the Giant Squid would never have got me."

"The Slytherin defense club," his dad began.

Harry shook his head. "You know that's not the same. No one can keep up with me. And that's not being arrogant," he added quickly, "it's merely a statement of fact."

His dad abandoned his intimidation tactic and sat in the chair next to Harry's bed. "We did not have a so-called *defense club* when I was in school," he said. "We were under no illusions regarding the purpose behind our dueling. In the common room, in the corridors, on the quidditch pitch."

Harry listened raptly. His dad never talked about his time as a student.

"Of course, our favorite targets were from other houses," his dad continued. "Blood traitors. Mudbloods. The usual suspects." His dad met his eyes. "Dueling is not the sanitized

production that idiot Lockhart would have you believe, nor the noble stories Flitwick might tell you. It is *power*. The power of knowledge over your opponent. Casting faster, stronger, more diverse spells. Recognizing the spell they wish to cast before they speak the first syllable, from the merest twitch of their wand. Knowing their habits so you may exploit them, twist them to your own ends. It is unceasing, relentless, all encompassing. It is the ultimate expression of magic, the sum total of our past, present, future, the collective experience of millenia. Blood, wealth, identity, all conceits mean *nothing*. There is only you. It *defines* us, Harry, far more than any other discipline which we, in our hubris, have erected as some crude testament to our dominance of the earth.”

Harry’s mouth had fallen open. Lady Madeleine’s ear twitched.

“You like dueling,” Harry said, barely able to contain his excitement. He thought his dad’s passion was potion-making. He should have known better from the spells his dad had invented. He had been so wrong.

His dad raised an eyebrow.

“You blasting Lockhart across the Great Hall was the fucking coolest thing I have seen in my entire life,” Harry said emphatically.

His dad smiled briefly. “I admit, it was one of the highlights of my tenure here. As I was saying, dueling is a pursuit that requires a significant time investment. It is not simply casting spells.”

“Do you not have time?” Harry asked, his excitement dimming. He wanted to have his dad teach him, but if he couldn’t Harry would find another way.

His dad closed his eyes, making a face as if he was in pain. “I’ll always have time for you.”

Madam Pomfrey kicked him out of the hospital wing.

She was kind enough to release Harry before dinner so he could get to the Great Hall before everyone else. His things had already been taken back to his dormitory by a house-elf. He didn’t want to cause a scene. He wanted to fold himself back in seamlessly.

It felt strange wearing shoes again, and robes, and to be dry.

Harry walked slowly through the corridors, feeling unbalanced. He had new bones, and knowing that made him too aware of what all of his limbs were doing. Madam Pomfrey wanted him to walk around the Black Lake once a day, to get his strength back up. Harry thought simply getting to his classes would be enough, but suspected she had an ulterior motive. He was fine with it. He would walk around the lake.

He made it to the Great Hall in one piece, and was slightly dismayed to see he wasn't the first to arrive. That honor went to Professor Burbage, who waved at him. Harry could not recall ever speaking to her, but he raised his hand in greeting, which seemed to please the unusual woman. It took a moment for him to notice his dad, who sat next to Professor Burbage like a dark cloud. He did not look amused by their fairly innocuous exchange. Harry decided to make a point of interacting with Professor Burbage more.

Sitting at the Slytherin table was a relief. The whole world was pressing down on him. Everything was so *solid*, less malleable. He didn't miss the water—Harry doubted he'd be having a bath any time soon—but he missed how easy it had been to move.

Harry reached into his robes, ignored the temptation of reading his comic filled with random acts of sex and violence and gay koalas, and pulled out a gobstone. He began rolling it across his fingers, concentrating so it wouldn't fall. He nearly dropped it when someone screamed his name.

“Harry!”

He turned toward the doors, peripherally aware the Great Hall had been filling up around him, and saw Astrid in a flat out sprint, her robes majestically flapping behind her. Harry had no idea why she needed an excuse to shave her head, but he was happy to provide one.

Astrid threw herself at him, which made Harry grateful for his weird new bones as they tumbled to the ground.

“Astrid!” Jasmine shouted. “He *just* got out!”

“Nice to see you too,” Harry wheezed, hugging his best friend back.

“Don't die,” Astrid mumbled, squeezing him tighter.

Harry's mind went blank. He hadn't realized that was a fear of hers.

“I'm not going to,” Harry finally said, wincing as Adrian seized the back of their robes and hauled them both up, laughing like a maniac.

He was unceremoniously swarmed by more of his housemates. Tracey was openly crying while Bridget and Vincent tried to comfort her, Mafalda had a death grip on Killian's robes, Derek was starting a chant with the other second-years, along with a surprisingly passionate Jason Mulciber. He saw his other sixth-year friends, Terence and Cassius awkwardly carrying an unconscious Phoebe between them, while Jasmine shot water at her face. Luna wriggled under Adrian's arms, giving Harry a quick hug before retreating.

Lady Madeleine ran across the table, chasing Felipe as he fluttered desperately from person to person. Someone set off fireworks from the direction of Gryffindor, and they shot overhead, bouncing off of walls and through ghosts, knocking floating candles out of orbit. Professor McGonagall started shouting at them, but after a moment gave up on establishing any order.

So much for not causing a scene.

Chapter End Notes

[Here](#) is the "voodoo" Harry was looking at. It was the 80s...

Flowers of Scotland

Chapter Summary

April 1995

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all of your comments! It's very much appreciated, I don't think I can stress that enough

Does anyone remember doing (((((name-of-person))))) to "hug" someone? Or "bombing" chatrooms with, like, scripts and ASCII art? The internet in the 90s was the fucking wild west.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry was back in the swing of things.

He declined to answer any questions regarding his prolonged stay in hospital, as it was intimately related to a part of himself only a handful of people knew. This reminded Harry that he still had not told Percy, and that he needed to. More importantly, he *wanted* to. He wanted to trust Percy, he wanted Percy to be the kind of person who wouldn't care, to whom it made no difference. He knew Percy felt something for him, he only hoped Percy cared about him enough for their fledgling relationship to survive.

Harry couldn't get a read on how the school felt about him. Some students were impressed, mostly Slytherins. Others were wary, including some Slytherins. It was clear his absence had been noted, had been conspicuous, as the only champion seriously injured during the Second Task. The only champion to have had a Second Task of note.

In his first Defense class since his hospitalization, Harry sat in the front row. To his surprise, Fred and George took seats across the aisle from him. Harry glanced at them, and saw both twins were grinning like fools

"Mum says Percy's been really out of it lately," Fred said to George.

"Yeah, heard he's being a right foul git at home," George replied. "I wonder what's got him so hot and bothered?"

“Who knows,” Fred said airily. “Could be stress from work. I heard Crouch is riding him hard.”

“Bet he wishes someone else was,” George said.

Harry reached into his robes just as Professor Lupin walked into the room. He could practically hear the twins smirking.

“Good afternoon, class,” Lupin said, smiling at them. Phoebe sighed dreamily. It made Harry’s skin crawl. Lupin was his *dad’s* age. There was something seriously wrong with his classmates.

“It has been brought to my attention that you are all severely lacking in dueling experience,” Lupin continued. “While we do some practical work in class, if you should encounter a real life scenario in which you are forced to fight with magic, I will sadly not be there to give you pointers.”

Harry listened as Lupin explained the adjustment to their class time, wondering at this change. He could scarcely imagine his dad *willingly* speaking to Lupin about anything. Would he complain about the Defense curriculum? His dad complained about a lot of things, but to effect such a change over the course of a weekend was remarkable. What had he done to Lupin?

They packed their things away and followed Lupin to the Great Hall. Harry hoped Lupin would be doing the same in other classes. He had done his best to forget about the Triwizard Tournament during his tank time, as there was little he could do to prepare either himself or Monty for a task he could only speculate about. But, the Triwizard Tournament was ongoing. Eventually, they would learn about the Third Task. The more comfortable Monty got with rapid-fire spellcasting, the safer he would be. Harry couldn’t ask his dad to train Monty as well, but he could use what he learned to help his brother. Or Monty could go to Lupin for additional practice.

He nearly stopped walking. That was straying dangerously close to asking a professor for help with the tournament. That his dad agreed to train him in dueling strongly implied they were not expected to duel during the Third Task. It wasn’t much to go off of, but it was something.

There was still an odd number of students, and Harry expected, and somewhat hoped, to be paired with Lupin again. Lupin, defying expectations, had another idea in mind.

“Fred, George,” Lupin said, putting his hands on the shoulders of the twins and steering them towards Harry. “You’re working together against Harry.”

“What?” they both said.

“That’s unfair, professor,” Jasmine protested.

Adrian snorted. “Yeah, for *them*.”

Harry watched the twins indifferently as they regretted every single decision that had brought them to this point in time. It was too late for them, Lupin had already gone to pair up the rest of the students. Harry was happy to see Astrid was up against Alicia. He had no idea what the relationship between the two girls was, other than it involved an intense, passionate rivalry. Harry had never been on Astrid's level when it came to quidditch.

Fred cleared his throat. "We were joking, you know."

Harry looked at Fred. "You're always joking, aren't you?"

"You thought it was funny, right, Evans?" George said hopefully.

"Your allusions to Percy fucking his way up the Ministry ranks?" Harry said lightly, taking out his wand. "There's more than one way to skin a weasel."

"Don't you mean kneazle?" Fred asked, his voice strangled.

"No."

"Begin!" Lupin shouted.

"Porcoformatio."

A pink light shot at Fred, striking him in the face.

"What spell is that?" George shouted, forgetting he had a wand and was meant to fight back. "Professor! What are the rules!"

"Ah, Harry, no human transfiguration if you please," Lupin said, hurrying over. "Sorry, boys, I should have clarified that!"

Harry watched sadly as the pig head he had given Fred reverted to his normal stupid face.

"What the fuck, Evans?" George said, patting his brother's head to make sure it was all there.

"I was bringing out his inner swine," Harry said lightly, checking his wand over. "I called it Porking Pastilles."

"That," Fred began, once he could speak again, "is actually a great name."

"I'll put you two out of business," Harry said, readying his wand. "Alright, no human transfiguration. I suppose that's fine, you two do a good enough job of turning into asses on your own."

Lupin placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Take it *easy* on them, okay?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, smiling disarmingly at the twins. "Take your best shot."

"Balke gesnot!" George shouted, just as Fred tried to disarm Harry.

“*Accio* Fred,” Harry said, hiding his amusement as his spell seized Fred’s robes and sent him hurtling into the path of George’s spell.

“You can’t summon people!” Fred cried, just as he was beaten over the head with his own bat-shaped snot. Harry was not surprised they knew such a grotty spell.

“I didn’t,” Harry said, flicking his wand towards George. It was their own fault for trusting the words he said. “*Levicorpus*.”

George, who had been trying to undo the hex he had cast on his own brother, was caught by the leg and hauled into the air. Fred was fumbling with his own wand, trying to do something with the bats beating him over the head.

“*Mustelifacie*,” Harry said, transfiguring the bats into weasels for his own amusement.

“*Flipendo!*”

He sidestepped George’s spell, and blocked another attempt at disarming him. George was casting spells upside down, which was neat.

Harry waited for Fred to get rid of the snot-weasels.

“No one’s going to wait for you in real life,” Harry said, casting a silent *protego* to block another attack from George.

“*Depilipatium!*” Fred cried.

“Percy likes my hair,” Harry muttered, annoyed that Fred was trying to disfigure him. True, he could regrow his hair with a potion, but it was the principle of the matter.

He made a circle in the air with his wand “*Popet healme*.”

A large puppet made of straw appeared before Harry, only to be decapitated by Fred’s spell

“What?” George shouted, holding his robes up with one hand as he spun lazily through the air.

Harry pointed at the stones under Fred’s feet. “*Aquam haurire*.”

Fred jumped as water surged up through the stones, soaking him as it fountained around him.

“*Musteliaquim*.”

The water transformed into huge weasels, who began to dance around Fred on their hind legs.

“Get me down from here!” George growled. “*Brackium emendo!*”

Harry flicked his wand, and his straw puppet lost all of its straw bones. Harry frowned at George, who had used the same Lockhart spell that deboned Monty’s arm.

“Liberacorpus,” Harry snapped, countering his own jinx on George.

Fred was busy repeatedly casting the Drought Charm and dodging water-weasels. Harry cast a Cushioning Charm just before George hit the ground, not wanting him to get seriously hurt. It was interesting to Harry how disjointed the twins' approach had been.

“Incendio,” Harry said, setting George's robes on fire. He yelped, tried putting it out with his hands, then ran headfirst into a water-weasel.

“Carcemaquiam,” Harry intoned, encasing both Fred and George in a cage made of water.

They were still trying to get out when Lupin called time.

The last Slytherin game of the year, their quidditch match against Hufflepuff, was an event that would go down in history.

The vendetta against Hufflepuff, spearheaded by Astrid and apparently Harry's little brother, had reached a fever pitch. Harry found himself in the commentator's stand, having stunned Lee Jordan and taken his bullhorn away.

Harry still occasionally felt detached from himself, as if his bones were floating away in different directions. His jaunts through the castle, for classes and prefect rounds, had gradually got him used to being a terrestrial being again. Getting back into gobstones, and picking up his hurdy-gurdy, helped with his dexterity. It was exhausting most days, being human, and Harry had yet to get on his skateboard again. He was worried he'd fall right off, but hoped that a month-long break hadn't ruined years of building his skills.

A battle cry rose from the Slytherin stands, where a banner of an occamy, reared back to strike at their opponents, unfolded in all of its emerald glory. Jasmine had even charmed it to shriek and hiss, drawing disturbed reactions from the other students.

“Before the match begins,” Harry said into the bullhorn, *“if you could all please stand for the national anthem. Well, one of them.”*

Harry set the bullhorn down and adjusted his hurdy-gurdy strap. He nodded to Astrid, who was standing in the middle of the pitch with her broom planted in the ground and an arm thrown across Adrian's shoulder.

“Mr. Evans,” Professor McGonagall shouted, struggling to get out of the professor's stand. His dad was doing an impressive job of blocking her. *“What in the world do you think—”*

Harry began turning the crank, his fingers clacking the first notes.

“Oh, flower of Scotland...”

He was relieved he wasn't the only one singing.

"When will we see...your like again..."

Harry knew Astrid would. She was belting the lyrics with all of her heart.

"That fought and died for..."

To his surprise, Luna was waving her own little occamy flag, and singing along.

"...your wee bit Hill and Glen. And stood against her..."

"Against who?" Astrid bellowed.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Proud Helga's army..."

Professor McGonagall, who had been compelled to join in, looked bemused by this small change.

"And sent her homeward to think again..."

Harry hoped appealing to her patriotism would count towards him when McGonagall reviewed his Head Boy application, or at least canceled out overpowering Lee Jordan, who was just coming to.

He shook his head and continued playing through a second verse, snorting when Lee Jordan seized the bullhorn and began shouting the lyrics into it. When it was over, Astrid gave a rather extravagant *up yours* to Cedric, who was too busy wiping tears from his eyes to have noticed. The other Hufflepuffs did, though. Sadly, there was no time for them to put together a rendition of *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau* in defense of their house's founder.

Harry tried to leave the commentator's stand, but Lee Jordan had decided that Harry was not going anywhere. He threw his arm around Harry's neck, and began announcing the players.

"...and they're off! Seeker Diggory is on a new Nimbus Two Thousand and One, a big change from his Cleansweep Seven! What do you think, Evans?"

"The Cleansweep Eight might have been a better choice, Jordan," Harry said flatly. "The Slytherin team really struggled to adapt to the Two Thousand and Ones back in the 1992 to 1993 season. As you can see, most of our players chose brooms they are confident they can handle."

"Well said! And it seems Chaser Smith, new on the Hufflepuff team this year, is in possession!"

"And there's Beater Bulstrode with a direct hit," Harry cut in. "This is the first time Captain Urquhart has Bulstrode out on the pitch, subbing in for Bole as he's studying for N.E.W.T.s."

There was an audible gasp from the crowd as the bludger hit Zacharias Smith in the side.

Lee sucked in a hiss. “That’s gotta sting. And Hufflepuff has lost possession, Chaser Paddington—”

“Warrington,” Harry corrected.

“*Paddington* gets the quaffle,” Lee said, his voice rising.

“Chaser Warrington with a seamless pass to Chaser Montague,” Harry said drily, “who has expressed a complete disinterest in his N.E.W.T.s.”

“Evans!” McGonagall shouted. “No color commentary!”

Lee smirked at him. “Montague passes back to Paddington... And that’s ten points to Slytherin, a feat that *never* ceases to amaze me, as sloths are generally considered slow creatures.”

“Jordan!”

“As the Hufflepuff Keeper Oakham retrieves the quaffle,” Harry said, “this is a gentle reminder that the Gobstones Tournament will commence immediately after Easter break. Both Jordan and I are *dedicated* stoners—”

Lee spluttered.

“—and hopes are high, very, very high, that we will have at least thirty people attend the finals this year.”

“Do *not* make me come up there!”

“Sadly,” Harry continued, “the round-robin has been canceled this year due to the Triwizard Tournament. The rotation has been tampered with.”

Lee snatched the bullhorn back. “And Keeper Urquhart punches the quaffle! Damn, I would not want to get on that woman’s bad side!”

“Language!”

“I’m imagining it’s Diggory’s head!” Astrid shouted, flying in front of her hoops like a tiger pacing her cage.

“A disturbing visual,” Lee said nervously. “Moving on, it looks like Seeker Higgs has spotted something!”

Harry glanced at Terence, who had suddenly dived. It wasn’t nearly steep enough for a Wronski Feint—Astrid was a fanatic, but she wasn’t out to seriously injure her players, and Harry doubted Angelina Johnson had coached his brother on how to do it—but Harry looked slightly ahead of Terence and saw the sky was empty. He was trying to bait Cedric, break his concentration.

Harry conjured himself a chair and sat down, letting Lee do most of the commentary. Occasionally he chipped in, as Lee had very blatant anti-Slytherin bias, and a particular dislike for Cassius that Harry couldn't begin to unpack. He knew Lee's dad worked in Percy's department, and that Cassius' grandmother was an ambassador for Magical Britain. Had they crossed paths?

The game went on for a few hours. The Hufflepuff team was surprisingly well balanced, but Astrid was an extraordinary keeper, so Slytherin was racking up points. Millie was, unsurprisingly, out for blood, and seemed to have taken directions from Astrid to target Cedric. It was a rather popular tactic, going after the opposing seeker to drag out the game. It was the last game for both Slytherin and Hufflepuff. Hufflepuff had one loss and one win, and was likely going to end up in third place overall. Slytherin was fighting for first. The Gryffindor and Ravenclaw match being the last of the year gave both teams significant control over the results. Everyone expected Gryffindor to win that, but the problem was always by how many points.

"And Diggory's spotted the snitch!"

"Shit," Harry muttered, checking the score. It was two hundred twenty to eighty. He could see the Slytherin chasers fighting for possession, desperate to get another goal. Terence was pushing himself to the limit, but the Two Thousand and One was faster than the Comet Two Ninety Terence had got for Christmas. However, Terence had been flying that broom for over four months. Cedric had only been flying his Nimbus for a few weeks.

That, and Terence was a better flier.

Lee was shouting into the bullhorn as the snitch lurched to the side. Cedric tried to follow, but overcorrected. Terence, who had been lagging behind, had no problem changing his trajectory. He had several inches on Cedric, and reached out with a deftness earned through hundreds of hours of pre-dawn practices ever since Terence was in second year.

Terence caught the snitch.

As Lee mourned into his bullhorn, Harry struck up his hurdy-gurdy again, playing the victorious Slytherin team out.

Sometimes Harry wished he had his brother's invisibility cloak. Invisibility cloaks, in general, were rather magically mundane objects. The more expensive ones, and those which had some longevity, were made from demiguise wool. Others were plain cloaks that had been enchanted with Disillusionment Charms—something anyone could do, with varying degrees of success—a Bedazzling Hex to daze and confuse any onlookers, or some other spell tacked onto the cloak. Monty's invisibility cloak was nothing like those. All Harry knew was that it had been Monty's dad's at some point, and that James Potter had likely received it from his father, who received it from his mother, and so on, in some unbreakable chain of Potters.

Sometimes, Harry wondered if his dad had intended for the Prince and Snape names to die with him.

Harry did not have an invisibility cloak, but he did have his mum's cloak, and he was pleased by this symmetry. While the weather had warmed with the arrival of spring, it was still cold along the shore of the Black Lake. He had waited until after dinner to take his Madam Pomfrey-mandated lakeside ramble, enjoying the crisp air and the relative seclusion.

When he was about halfway around the lake, the water between him and the castle, Harry felt a tingle down his spine. He stopped walking and looked across the dark water. A few murtlaps squeaked nearby as one was seized by a grindylow. Harry was glad it went back into the water before it began eating.

Harry looked up at the sounds of footsteps running towards him, holding up his hands in surprise as Monty launched himself into a hug, his invisibility cloak fluttering to the ground.

"Jesus," Harry wheezed. "Why is everyone I know so violent?"

Monty snorted, and hugged him tighter. "I've been meaning to say this all month, but you've been ill. I'm sorry."

Harry patted his little brother's back, confused. "For what?"

"You could've done the boat thing," Monty said, releasing him.

Harry gave him a concerned look. "Yeah, I know that. So?"

"So," Monty said, "if you did, you wouldn't have got hurt."

"I'm not so sure about that," Harry said slowly. "Someone was trying to get me out of the lead. Whoever put your name in clearly wants you to win."

Monty's brow furrowed. "But why?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair, looking back at the water. "I've no bloody idea. What I do know is you don't want to give them what they want."

"You mean don't win?" Monty asked. "I wasn't going to anyway."

"You could," Harry said, smiling faintly. "You're an excellent wizard for your age."

Monty scoffed, crossing his arms. "I don't think I could fight the Giant Squid."

"You could," Harry repeated firmly, his eyes growing distant. If that piece of shit squid laid a single tentacle on his brother... Harry sighed. "It's a matter of knowing when to use which spell. A standard Severing Charm wouldn't cut through one of her tentacles."

"What do you mean?" Monty asked.

Harry gave him a rueful grin. "I used dark magic, Monty. Here, let me show you."

Harry was glad he was wearing muggle clothes, as it would have been incredibly weird to take off his robes. Instead, he only had to throw back his mum's cloak and lift his jumper slightly to show Monty the scar on his stomach.

"I thought that healed," Monty said quietly, looking slightly repulsed by the jagged, ropy scar. Harry didn't take it personally.

"Kelpies are considered dark creatures," Harry explained, tugging his jumper back down.

"I know that," Monty said. His eyes widened in understanding. "So Madam Pomfrey couldn't heal that!"

"She could heal it," Harry gently corrected. "But I'll always have the scar. Same thing with my ankle. Kelpie teeth marks for life."

Monty frowned. "You used dark magic to cut off the Giant Squid's tentacle?"

"Part of it," Harry said. "They had to amputate the rest so she could regrow it."

"What spell was it?" Monty asked.

Harry was quiet for a moment, thinking of how to respond. The thought of his brother having to fight for his life kept him up at night. The thought of his brother having to use a spell like Sectumsempra, a spell his dad designed to carve someone up and leave them to bleed to death, made Harry feel like he was failing.

"It was a spell that was very popular among Death Eaters," Harry said quietly. Monty went still next to him. Harry wrapped his arms around himself. "It's hard to define what *dark arts* are, but I can assure you the curse I used was invented with the sole intent to hurt someone, irreparably."

"That isn't very assuring," Monty said flatly.

Harry laughed a little, feeling like a terrible influence. He wanted Monty to be a better person than he was.

"And I don't think it matters," Monty continued. "You could've died!"

Harry hesitated, then put an arm around his little brother. "I'm sorry if I made you worried."

"I'm glad you're okay," Monty said. "Even if the Giant Squid lost a few tentacles."

Harry sighed heavily, letting himself acknowledge the deep, unsettling ache in his bones. His punishment.

"Me too."

Chapter End Notes

I did end up writing one chapter of an [asocial fem!Harry fic](#) if anyone's curious

Above Board

Chapter Summary

April 1995

“Elatior.”

The sheer audacity of his son attempting a Cheering Charm on him mortally offended Severus to the extent that the charm successfully made contact. He was, of course, not cheered. Charms which altered the emotions had no effect on an Occlumens.

Harry was giving him a cheeky look, which made Severus simultaneously relieved and irritated. He appreciated the irony of his son’s mood having more influence on his own than any spell could. If anyone knew how important Harry was to him, more than simply a favored student, they could break Severus.

Severus raised his hand, bringing their present duel to a halt.

“How did you put Lupin up to it?” Harry asked.

His son made to sit down, and Severus raised an eyebrow when a wooden chair appeared beneath him. Harry had suggested that they use the Room of Requirement, a room which, from what Severus had been able to deduce, Hogwarts Castle had *grown* in response to a need. Severus wished he had discovered it when he was a student.

It was a strange feeling, seeing one’s own child become a better person. It gave Severus an overwhelming sense of pride for his son. He did not know if he had any right to feel that way.

The Room of Requirement was fickle in its affections, and clearly had formed something of a bond with Harry, who was a frequent visitor. As such, Severus conjured his own chair.

“I may have made several oblique comments as to how woefully unprepared we are should the Dark Lord rise again,” Severus said, smiling slightly at his son’s amusement. Severus was aware that Lupin was well-liked by the students, and could admit Lupin was a competent and effective instructor. There was, however, always room for improvement.

Whatever else Lupin was, he was not ignorant. He was among the few who had seen the writing on the wall since the attack on the Quidditch World Cup. It had not taken much effort to convince the man that the students needed to be pushed harder. There was only so much Severus could do as a Potions Master.

Severus knew his son was not being challenged in his classes, and likely had not been since his first year. Harry was fairly open about studying and practicing magic during the summer;

Severus had caught the boy in the act, stealing cheap chocolate from Tesco, though Harry had been unaware he was Disillusioning himself. Accidentally. Ludicrous.

Harry was not special in that regard. There were other bright, magically gifted students, some who excelled across the board, others who favored one subject, and still others whose interests and talents lay outside of academics. Severus was, however, only personally invested in Harry.

There had not been many opportunities for Severus to attend to Harry's growth as a dueler. With the end of the year approaching, things were progressively busier. Part of his heavy-handedness with Lupin was a way for Harry to get more practice exchanging spells with a variety of opponents. People had different styles, different spell preferences, different physical abilities. Unless one was the Dark Lord, who threw around Killing Curses and Cruciatuses like sweets, an effective dueler did not have a blanket style. They needed to be adaptive.

As impressed as he was by his son, Severus had identified several poor habits Harry had developed. Habits that could get his son killed.

"You favor transfiguration in your dueling," Severus said, looking directly at Harry so the boy would stop teetering on his chair legs like a buffoon.

Harry sat properly, all chair legs on the floor, and sighed. "I think it's fun."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "While there is creativity in dueling, it is not an art in the sense that you can play around. The goal is not to *have fun*."

Harry wrinkled his nose. "I know that. The goal is to win."

"And do you think you will win by aggravating your opponent to death?" Severus asked icily.

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again as he rethought what he was going to say.

"A clever opponent, someone more skilled in transfiguration than Fred Weasley, will turn your own spells against you," Severus said. "Anything conjured can be vanished. Anything transfigured can be untransfigured."

Harry nodded.

"You speak of wanting to improve the speed of your spellcasting," Severus said. "You must also improve your discernment. Taunting the Weasley twins in class for some perceived slight is *not* a behavior conducive to survival. You cannot *play* with Death Eaters."

Harry swallowed then looked to the ground. "I *am* taking it seriously, you know."

Severus leaned back and sighed. He was aware his son did many things because he found them amusing. He was much like a cat toying with its prey. Severus had to remind himself that Harry was accustomed to exchanging spells with other students. He had rarely faced

someone older, more experienced, and deadly serious. The years of relative peace and stability after the Dark Lord's disappearance had lulled many into complacency.

It was Severus' duty to teach his son to not take frivolous chances with his own life.

"I was thinking," Harry said, drawing his attention, "about transfiguration."

"Fascinating," Severus said drily.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I was thinking about how dangerous it is. For example, if you transfigured someone's blood into something else."

Severus furrowed his brow. "In which book have you encountered *blood* transfiguration?"

"I haven't," Harry denied. "Actually, I did read about it, but in a muggle comic."

Severus resisted the urge to cover his face. The indignity of purchasing glossy literature for a teenager was something he would never live down. It took a moment for Severus to compose himself.

"I agree the idea has merit," he finally said, "in that it would likely kill the victim immediately. On its face, it would be a very delicate and precise form of human transfiguration. Human transfiguration is difficult not only for the complexity of the spells, but that one is performing it on a *magical human*."

Harry wrapped his arms around himself, nodding slightly. His son was intimately familiar with how challenging such magic was. The idea of transfiguring blood into something else *was* intriguing. It strayed into alchemy. Perhaps something about the skrewts could be transfigured...

"I believe the skin would form a natural barrier to that," Severus said. "As you know, many spells can be blocked in such a manner. This is another weakness to transfiguration, as you could impede your own spells with something you previously conjured."

Harry smiled slightly. "Yeah. I couldn't really hit Fred with anything with all those water-weasels in the way."

Severus examined his son. He had checked on Harry daily while he was sequestered in his tank, usually when the boy was asleep. Harry was looking healthier, now that he was eating and drinking again. The gillyweed had done something strange to Harry's digestive system, another effect of the plant which had previously been unknown. Half of the potions in the water had been to keep the boy hydrated and properly nourished.

"Would you like to return to Cokeworth for Easter holiday?" Severus asked.

Harry's smile grew. "Yeah."

Monty wanted to hurl his cauldron across the room. Snape had been very clear that any experiments Monty did were to be done only under his supervision. It was frustrating, the entire potion development process and his own conflicted feelings. On the one hand, Monty *could* do experiments in secret, like Fred and George did. On the other, he had no idea what Snape would do if he found out.

There was an ingredient Monty wanted to use, but he wasn't sure how to approach Snape about it. He would ask Monty where he had got occamy blood from. He couldn't exactly say he *asked* for it. Monty knew Sirius would take the fall for him, but all occamy-based ingredients were highly regulated by the Ministry. The only thing that was legal to use in Britain were occamy eggs, and that required a special permit from Control and Regulation. Monty had read an article in *The Practical Potioneer* about Gilderoy Lockhart getting in loads of trouble trying to import occamy eggs for use in a hair potion. A very dangerous, highly volatile, probably lethal hair potion.

"Are you finished bothering me for the evening, Potter?"

Monty looked away from the unsalvageable mess in his cauldron. Snape was at his desk, paging through a huge, ominous book. Looking at it made Monty's skin crawl.

"Yeah," Monty said. "I mean, yes, sir. I was wondering..."

Snape stared at him, looking supremely bored. "Spit it out, Potter. I don't have all day."

It was the night before the start of Easter holiday, and Monty knew other students would shortly be leaving Hogwarts for the duration. Monty was staying, like he stayed every holiday, as were Hermione and Ron. Neville was going to spend the holiday with his family, and Luna was looking forward to seeing her dad. Lady Madeleine had brought him a note from Harry, letting Monty know Harry was also leaving. Some kind of skateboarding quest, apparently. And Snape was shutting down the potions labs for the holiday, as he was going on a purchasing trip.

Monty wished he had signed up to leave too. He could have spent the two weeks with Sirius and let Hester terrorize the garden gnomes. But he had a ton of homework, and had to train for their last quidditch match, and Hermione was scaring him with her obsession over Skeeter, and there was the Third Task, and Remus was staying. There were rumors about another dueling club starting up.

"I was wondering," Monty repeated, realizing Snape was growing visibly annoyed, "if, theoretically, I wanted to use an ingredient not typically available."

Snape kept staring at him. "What ingredient?"

"Theoretically," Monty stressed, "in *theory*, something harvested from an XXXX-classified creature."

Snape closed his book and pinched the bridge of his nose. “It took the headmaster *decades* to discover the twelve uses for dragon’s blood. Whatever creature you have in mind, Potter, as you are presently a fourth-year student, should you discover such rarefied blood is applicable to *flying seahorse flight bladders*, it would be a miracle equivalent to your survival of the Killing Curse.”

Snape stood, walking over to frown at Monty’s latest disaster. “No, you may not fiddle with such a volatile ingredient. Perhaps when you are a N.E.W.T. student it would be permissible to begin analyzing the creature blood, but I cannot condone its use in your current endeavor. If it is, as I suspect, a non-native creature, I doubt it would be beneficial to the seahorses.”

Monty nodded, picking up his wand to vanish the contents of his cauldron. Doing that without vanishing the entire cauldron was something Snape had made him practice repeatedly.

Snape hadn’t gone back to his desk. Monty gave him a curious look.

Snape sighed, apparently having come to some decision. “I myself have been stymied in the development of a new potion. While I have been subject to some discouragement, failure,” he said, sneering at the word, “is part of the process. Many who could become adept potioners balk at the opportunity when they do not meet with instant success.”

Monty looked down, still feeling frustrated. He understood what Snape was saying. During his months of trying to make a potion to help the floundering flying seahorses, Monty *had* learned tons about potion-making, ingredients, interactions, even things about how different cauldrons, tools, and magical fires affected the brewing process. He knew potion-making was hard, Snape had made that clear in their very first class. But Monty hadn’t appreciated at the time how vast, intricate, and demanding it was. There were just so many possibilities.

“It is my futile hope that students will learn from their own mistakes,” Snape finished, walking back to his desk. “If I believed you would disappoint in that regard, I would never have agreed to such a tedious arrangement.”

Monty ducked his head to hide a smile, then began packing up his ingredients. Snape had said *when* he was a N.E.W.T. student. That was practically a compliment.

Harry was snooping around his dad’s living room when the man himself stepped in through the floo.

Lady Madeleine meowed plaintively, but it was too late for Harry to pretend he was doing something innocent. His dad liked dark arts. It followed that his dad possessed books on the dark arts. The question was where, and the answer was obvious. Hidden in plain sight.

“If you are looking for any publications on soul magic,” his dad said, glowering as a shedding Lady Madeleine brushed against his pristine robes, “I confess my personal library is poor in that department. I doubt such books are available for purchase.”

“I’m not convinced souls are real,” Harry said, following his dad into the kitchen. Lady Madeleine ran ahead and jumped onto his chair. Harry picked her up and slung her over a shoulder. “I’ve got some concerns.”

His dad shook his head, and began making coffee. Harry leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. The Hogwarts Express was neat, but it was a pain to take a train from middle-of-nowhere Scotland to London, then take another one back north, then take a bus, when he could just use the floo.

“Why aren’t there muggle ghosts?” Harry asked.

“Muggles do not have magic,” his dad stated.

“Supposedly,” Harry said. “But if only people with magic can have ghosts, doesn’t that imply that we’re the only ones with souls?”

“Not necessarily,” his dad said. “It could suggest that only we are possessed of a quality to which an impression of a *soul* may attach.”

“Percy calls it *wizard exceptionalism*,” Harry said, smiling to himself. He had owled Percy to let him know he was away from Hogwarts for Easter holiday. He was waiting for a reply.

“I believe that is a topic in the Muggle Studies curriculum,” his dad said in a suspiciously even tone.

Harry’s smile grew. There wasn’t much he knew about his parents’ relationship, other than they had been friends until his dad called his mum a mudblood. It was more complicated than that, he knew it had to be. Saying one wrong thing wasn’t enough to destroy a friendship like that, but Harry knew it could expose a lot of other things that had been festering. He also knew that, somehow, his mum got pregnant with him, and decided to keep him despite all the danger having a kid like him in the middle of war presented. He didn’t know if his mum *loved* his dad as anything more than a friend, and he suspected his dad had stronger, unreciprocated feelings for his mum.

Lily Evans had been dead for a long time. Harry would always miss her, and would always wonder how things could have been different. His dad didn’t need to be chained by her memory. She had married James Potter. His dad was allowed to find someone else too.

“You’re interested in the Muggle Studies curriculum?” Harry asked guilelessly.

His dad kicked him out of the house, tossing Lady Madeleine and his skateboard after him.

Harry bent his knees a few times, checking his balance as he rolled down the cracked sidewalks of Cokeworth. Lady Madeleine was following at her own pace, acting more like a normal cat now they were in the muggle world.

There were no illusions about Cokeworth. Everyone knew, everyone could see, how rundown their town was. No money, no opportunities, no hope. It was a miserable place to live, and the only people who stayed were those who couldn't afford to leave, or had nowhere else to go.

Despite this, Harry liked Cokeworth. He liked the broken streets and abandoned buildings, the skeletal carcasses of factories, how dismal and grey it was. The desolation resonated with him. It was so bleak, so honest about what it was.

He ollied over a curb. He was starting off slow, over a month out of practice.

Harry made it to a small, overgrown park without falling. The chains on the swing sets had finally rusted through, and the tall, scraggly weeds hid broken glass, needles, and the occasional emaciated rodent. It was ghastly, but Harry had often played here as a kid. There wasn't much to do other than look around at the corpse of it all.

He found an old milk crate and sat down. The wind picked up, carrying familiar scents of exhaust, greasy food, and the nauseating rotten egg smell from the sewers. Harry used his boot to push around a cigarette butt. Smoking, drinking, nodding out. The Cokeworth trifecta.

There was a distant *hoot*, and Harry looked up at the featureless grey sky to see an owl barely distinguishable from the haze. Harry recognized the hoot, as he was pathetic and recognized all things Percy.

Harry held out an arm for Hermes to land, trying not to show how desperate he was to read whatever Percy had sent him. Hermes wasn't fooled; he had been carrying letters between the two of them for years at this point. Somehow owls were becoming the keepers of Harry's deepest secrets; other than his dad, Harry had only told Hedwig that Monty was his brother. Both Hermes and Hedwig knew where he lived, and both were too wise and honorable to betray that trust.

It almost made Harry want an owl too.

He nodded graciously to Hermes as he accepted the letter, and was pleased that Hermes settled nearby to await a reply.

Dearest Harry,

I am immensely relieved by your recovery. I confess, your reticence regarding the nature of your prolonged stay in hospital had been a subject of frequent contemplation.

Harry closed his eyes, hanging his head down. He knew, fundamentally, that if he and Percy were going to have a serious relationship, things could not continue like this. Harry just didn't know *when* would be a good time to tell him. Dropping it on him during Easter holiday and fucking off back to Hogwarts seemed like a shitty thing to do. He wanted, he *needed*, more time than that. In a few months, he would be seventeen, an adult in the eyes of their society despite still being a Hogwarts student.

And, deep down, Harry was scared. He knew Percy's parents, at least his mum, would not approve of any relationship between them. He knew there were things he simply could not give Percy. Harry felt like he was standing on a cliff, waiting for the inevitable fall. And he knew, to some extent, that he was building things up far out of proportion. Percy was a good person. Percy liked him. Percy was, first and foremost, one of his closest friends.

Harry looked at Hermes, who was preening his feathers in a very pompous manner that forcefully reminded Harry of Percy trying to tame his hair. He glanced at the letter, picking out the response he had been waiting for.

...I am available to meet Easter Sunday...

"Hey," Harry said quietly, getting the owl's attention. "Can I tell you something?"

"Oh, Hermes is back!" his mother said, wiping her hands on her apron and hurrying to the window.

Percy looked up from his *Sunday Prophet*, his heart racing. He hadn't expected Hermes to return so soon. He had a vague idea of where Harry could be when he wasn't at Hogwarts. He sometimes stayed in London, at the Leaky Cauldron. Percy had heard, entirely by accident and not at all while eavesdropping, that Harry had told Ron and Monty that he lived in the Midlands. Whether that was true or not, Percy could not say. Based on the cadence of Harry's speech, he *did* suspect.

"And he's got a letter," his mother said, smiling as Hermes flew into the kitchen.

"Mr. Crouch is very punctual," Percy said, taking the letter and tucking it into a pocket. "Tournament business, I'm afraid."

His mother beamed at him, reaching across the table to pinch his cheek. "You've always been such a reliable child, Percy, but you needn't work on the weekends!"

"It is my honor to," Percy said gravely, the letter burning a hole in his pocket.

He was, in truth, extremely busy at work. In the run up to the Third Task, they were in intense negotiations regarding the creatures and plants they intended to import. It was a regulatory nightmare, but Mr. Crouch was adamant that everything had to be absolutely flawless, beyond reproach. Percy had no idea how they'd been able to cover up the Loch Ness Monster attempting to murder Harry, but Percy knew it had been a close thing. They already had someone at Loch Ness full time to keep the muggles placated. They couldn't have her roaming the waterways as she pleased.

Percy excused himself after breakfast, retreating to his room. He was busy, but he wanted to see Harry. He wanted visual proof that Harry had fully healed. He wanted to know what had gone so horribly wrong that it had taken Harry a month to recover. The Triwizard Tournament wasn't worth Harry's life.

Another Sunday

Chapter Summary

April 1995

Chapter Notes

I'm not usually one for trigger warnings, but there is a term in this chapter that some may consider offensive. Others may want to reclaim it.

The kitchen was heady with the scent of tempering chocolate, and toffee thickening in a large pot. His mother hummed along to a Celestina Warbeck song on the wireless, *Jackalope With Me This Easter*. Percy was finishing up a letter to his youngest brother, who in a fit of madness had owled him to ask about the Third Task.

I regret to inform you that it would be a violation of my employment contract to divulge any information regarding the Third Task. I'm afraid Fleamont, like the other champions, will have to wait to learn about it in a month's time.

He set the letter aside for the ink to dry, then watched as his mother formed shells of chocolate midair, filling them with rich toffee. It was an impressive display of control, particularly the embellishments on the shells. The chocolate Easter eggs were as big as dragon eggs, though Percy noted one of the chocolate eggs was miniscule in comparison, the size of a quail egg.

"I think I'll need Hedwig to help carry these," she said musingly. The snowy owl shuffled on Errol's perch; Errol had been dispatched a week prior, bearing eggs to Romania and Egypt.

There were six eggs in total, five large ones and a small one. Percy had no idea who the small one was for, but it was a blatant insult. His mother hadn't even put toffee in it.

Percy cleared his throat. "Mother?"

"Yes, dear?" she said, not looking away from her work.

"Would you be able to instruct me as to how to create a chocolate egg?"

“Whatever for?” she asked.

“I have a meeting tomorrow morning,” Percy said. “And given it is a holiday, it would only be polite to bring a gift.”

His mother looked away from her work, her eyes brightening. “A meeting?”

“With a colleague,” Percy said. “Tournament business.”

Her smile broadened. “Well, if you say so! Just be sure to come home in time for dinner. And don’t trouble yourself with helping, I’ll start another batch!”

“I would like to learn,” Percy insisted. “Or, if is inconvenient for you, I could attempt it on my own.”

His mother gave him a startled look. “I... It’s no inconvenience. I didn’t know you were interested in cooking, dear. I would love to teach you!”

Percy nodded, watching silently as his mother directed sheets of decorative foil to wrap around the giant chocolate Easter eggs. He imagined, briefly, what it would be like for Harry to join his family for Easter dinner. What it would be like for his mother to be happy for them.

He did not think about it for long.

Severus silently observed his child.

Harry was in the living room, surrounded by a dozen packages of hot cross buns and humming a nursery rhyme to himself. This was at odds with his hunched and brooding appearance, and his intense contemplation of the hot cross buns.

“I am leaving now,” Severus announced, watching his son’s reaction. Harry glanced at him. He had shadows under his eyes, and his hair was in minor disarray. Severus suspected his son had charmed his clothes to a deeper black, as the fabric seemed to absorb the light around it.

“Did you read the article on the motion to restrict the usage of non-human creatures as mascots in Quidditch?” Harry asked tonelessly.

“No,” Severus said.

“It was defeated,” Harry said, his gaze becoming distant. “Percy says it’s exploitative.”

Harry looked back to his packages of hot cross buns. Severus noted one of the flavors was Marmite. Disturbed, he backed away from his son.

“This one’s for your lady friend,” Harry said blankly, waving his hand at one of the packages. It rose from the floor and drifted towards Severus like a sinister obelisk of hot cross buns. Severus took the package from the air, and saw the buns had been injected with a strawberry cheesecake filling.

Severus did not acknowledge Harry’s unsettling remark. He had intended to use the floo, but in his growing panic he apparated on the spot.

Severus reappeared in an alley somewhere in Bristol.

“You’re early,” a chipper voice said.

Severus turned to see Charity approaching him. She was wearing a pale blue dress, and had a ridiculous hat on. It was decorated with dyed eggs and what appeared to be live infant chickens.

“Happy Easter,” she said, smiling at him. “What’s that you’ve got?”

“An offering,” Severus guessed, handing her the package. He had a perceptive child. He had to be more careful.

Charity took the strawberry cheesecake hot cross buns, her pretty eyes shining in delight.

“You can’t get these for love nor money! Thank you!”

Still reeling from his son’s behavior—when had the boy acquired so many hot cross buns?—Severus was not at all prepared when Charity kissed his cheek.

He froze, unable to process what had just happened. He was having an out-of-body experience. Reality slipped sideways. Severus Snape was not someone who received such affections.

She took a step away, smiling bashfully. The chicks on her hat peeped. “Too soon?”

Severus cleared his throat. “Your gratitude is noted.”

Charity snorted, tucking the package into a bag Severus had not noticed. “Come on, let’s get you a coffee.”

Severus crossed his arms, his thoughts muddled as he followed Charity down the busy streets. She was singing to herself about hot cross buns, the same tune his son had been humming. She had a pleasant voice. He had allowed many liberties over their acquaintanceship, but this latest development warranted further consideration. He was in no state of mind to do so at the moment.

“Any plans for Easter?” Charity asked. “Do you celebrate?”

“No,” Severus said. “It is merely another Sunday.”

She chuckled. “Yeah. My parents used to drag me to church, until I got my letter. They still go, but it’s hard to take it seriously when all the miracles are things kids in nappies can do by

accident.”

“Did you have plans with your family?” Severus asked in an entirely disinterested way.

“Not until dinner,” Charity said. “It’s mostly for the kids. Dyeing eggs, egg hunting, rolling eggs down hills.”

“A very egg-centric holiday,” Severus observed.

“The local primary school does an Easter hat parade,” she said, tipping up her own absurd head accessory. “It’s adorable.”

Severus was skeptical. He found most children disgusting and ill-mannered. He doubted festive hats would change his opinion.

Charity knew where she was going, and soon Severus stood with her in a queue, listening to her explanation of the various combinations of milk and coffee.

“Are you aware of the recent defeat of the motion to restrict mascots?” he asked vaguely, cognizant they were in a muggle establishment.

“Oh, *that*,” Charity said sourly. “The Ministry likes their race wars, yeah? The *Prophet* put what happened between the Irish and Bulgarian mascots in the games section! Vile. Absolutely vile. But it sells tickets like nothing.”

They sat down with their coffees. Charity raised an eyebrow when he cast a silencing charm around them.

“So, you’ve been stuck on a potion?” she prompted.

Severus scowled. Doing so reminded him he had cheeks, one of which had been...

“Unfortunately. I am attempting to develop a cure for a muggle affliction. What was *originally* a muggle affliction, I should say.”

“Is this about Evans and his shellfish allergy?” Charity asked blithely, breaking apart a crisp, elongated biscuit. She handed half to him, and demonstrated what to do by dipping her portion into her milky coffee.

“Yes,” Severus admitted.

“I heard the skrewts offed themselves,” she said with a knowing smile.

“There is a sole survivor,” he replied. He gave the strange biscuit a dubious look. “Given your familiarity with the muggle world, perhaps you could offer some insight.”

“I could,” Charity said slowly, “if I knew how allergies worked. I didn’t study biology, you know. You’d be better off taking the kid to a muggle doctor.”

Severus nodded, though he was disappointed. Harry’s mention of blood transfiguration, and his own insight regarding the transfiguration of skrewts, had opened a path forward. Severus

only needed to know what specifically about the skrewts, and other crustaceans and molluscs or abominable combinations thereof, to modify.

“Actually, I’ve got a better idea,” Charity said. “I’ve got dial-up at mine. Took ages to get it working.”

“Dial-up?” Severus asked.

“The information superhighway,” Charity explained, taking a bite out of her biscuit.

Severus stared at her. “What?”

Hermes had bit him.

The owl had left some deep cuts in his hand, and as he waited Harry rubbed at the tender scabs. He expected he would get another scar. He could have healed it with magic, a spell or one of the many potions at his dad’s house, but Harry chose not to. Hermes was, understandably, offended on Percy’s behalf. Harry wanted the reminder.

He sighed. He was a short way from the Leaky Cauldron, leaning against a wall. His stomach was twisted in anxious knots. He could have shielded his mind, distanced himself from his emotions, but he wanted to feel them. It was a strange mixture of excitement and fear. His blood was racing. Hermes had already given his judgment. It had nudged Harry closer towards his decision, but he still felt as if everything was going to fall apart.

“Good morning.”

Harry closed his eyes, his heart hammering wildly in his chest. It was just Percy. He had seen him a thousand times. He might never see him again.

Harry pushed himself from the wall, looking up at Percy. He knew he was doing a poor job of concealing his emotions, but he didn’t care. Percy was there, in a questionable alley just outside of the Leaky Cauldron, looking devastatingly gorgeous in pressed trousers and a knit jumper of rich purple, the sleeves pushed up to reveal freckled forearms.

“Happy Easter,” Harry said, his voice sounding strange and detached to his own ears. Percy’s brows lowered in concern.

Harry whipped out a plastic bag filled with a dozen varieties of hot cross buns and handed it to Percy.

“This is for you.”

Percy accepted the bag, his ears turning red. Harry wanted to kiss him. He worried he never would again.

“I have also prepared something for you,” Percy said, holding out a large egg Harry had somehow not noticed. Harry accepted the egg.

“Thank you,” he said. “Is it chocolate?”

“Indeed,” Percy said neutrally. “Are you alright?”

Harry swallowed, then stepped towards Percy. He raised a shaking hand and lightly took Percy’s arm. “I need to tell you something.”

The sudden apparition left Percy breathless. Of course, he knew the sixth-years had apparition lessons. But Harry was not of age. He did not have a license. He said he wasn’t taking the lessons.

“Sorry,” Harry said, smiling wryly. “I learned how to apparate right after the World Cup. It was prudent.”

If Harry was anyone else, Percy would have begun lecturing. But this was *Harry*. Harry knew the risks, he knew the law and why permits were required—for safety, true, but also to fine those who violated the Statute of Secrecy via notorious splinching and other improper apparition—so it was all redundant. Harry knew, and he had chosen to side-along Percy. They were both whole. Percy hadn’t even realized what was happening until it was over.

Harry was still holding his arm.

Percy, with no awareness of their surroundings, leaned down to kiss him.

Harry sighed into it, squeezing Percy’s arm lightly.

“You might not want to do that anymore,” Harry said quietly, pulling back. He was wearing a hooded jumper. It had a large, marsupial pocket, into which the chocolate egg disappeared. Harry hesitated, then reclaimed the bag he had given Percy, adding it to his illegally expanded pocket.

Percy noted that Harry was unusually pale, and the shadows had returned under his eyes. He was beginning to realize whatever Harry wanted to say was something serious, something Harry thought might change Percy’s opinion of him. Percy could not think of anything that ever would.

“Come on,” Harry said, releasing his arm. “It’s this way.” He began walking down the narrow street they had apparated to. Percy followed, feeling disjointed and off-balance.

Instead of addressing Harry’s foreboding words, Percy asked, “Where are we?”

“Footdee,” Harry said without looking back. “In Aberdeen. Astrid’s from here.”

Harry had apparated them across nearly two entire countries. It was an astonishing feat. He didn't even look winded.

"Are you staying here for the holiday?" Percy asked, lengthening his stride. Harry wasn't looking at him. He didn't appear to be looking at anything at all.

"No," Harry said.

Percy scanned their surroundings, taking in the small stone dwellings, the green hill rising above the tiled roofs, the sound of waves breaking, the cries of gulls that circled high above, their feathers bright against the grey sky.

"I can't tell you where I live," Harry added. "I'm sorry, I just can't."

Percy reached out, pulling Harry to a stop.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Harry still wasn't looking at him. His head was bowed, and he was beginning to hyperventilate.

"I just," Harry started. "It's... I wanted to go somewhere secluded. But I have no idea where that is. I don't have anywhere I can take you."

"Anywhere is fine," Percy said. "I don't care. I am content to simply be in your presence."

Harry made an odd huffing noise. "For now." He shook his head and stood straight again. "Alright. The beach. That's where I wanted to go. It's not far."

Percy let go of him, and Harry started walking again. He silently followed. His head felt stuffed with cotton. He could not conceive of what had Harry in such a state. Had Harry done something? Had something been done to him? Had *Percy* done something wrong?

Harry was correct, it was not far. The path they were on led right to the beach. The sand was wet and hard packed, their feet barely leaving prints as they walked across it. Harry went straight to the water, and for a moment Percy thought Harry would fling himself into the icy waves.

"I learned how to swim here," Harry said, coming to a stop where the water began to recede. "Astrid taught me."

Percy gave the entire North Sea a critical look.

Harry crouched down and pried a shell out of the sand.

"Is that safe?" Percy asked worriedly.

"It's not the shells I'm allergic to," Harry said, chucking the shell dismissively into the waves. He began to walk along the water line, and Percy continued to follow.

They had the beach to themselves. There was only the sea, the gulls, the wind, the crunch of shells under Harry's boots. It was secluded, as Harry had desired. They were the only two people in the world.

"Harry," Percy said.

Harry stopped walking. He had wrapped his arms around himself, and he was facing the sea. The wind was bitter, tossing Harry's dark hair around, sea spray leaving salty drops on Percy's lenses.

"I don't know if I'm ready," Harry said. He turned towards Percy, and his expression nearly crushed Percy's heart. Harry seemed so anxious, so confused, so young.

"Do you remember how I said I obliviated Cedric?" Harry asked, finally looking at him.

"I do," Percy said. "You wish to tell me what you shared with him?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Yes, that is what I am going to do. When I grow a pair."

Inexplicably, Harry started laughing, in a broken way that told Percy that Harry was not, in fact, amused.

"Do you intend to obliviate me too?" Percy asked. It was something he and Harry had spoken of before, how freely the Ministry used Memory Charms to control muggles. Where was the line?

Harry stopped laughing. "No. I would never do that to you. Which is why, if you feel like I have deceived you, or if you can't stand to be around me anymore, I'd ask you to keep it to yourself. I'm not ashamed of it, or embarrassed. If I was... It's something that could be used against me." Harry snorted disdainfully. "Like everything else."

Percy moved closer to Harry, causing him to jerk back. Percy ignored this, taking one of Harry's hands. He laced their fingers together, unsettled by how cold and lifeless Harry felt.

Harry sighed, sounding resigned. "I'm just torturing myself at this point." He looked up at Percy again, his dark eyes regaining some of their usual strength. Percy's mind was still reeling, taking in everything he could. The set of Harry's jaw, how exhausted he looked, his determination, how Harry was now holding his hand back, his trepidation at Harry's dissembling, the uncomfortable distance between them.

"I'm a little different from other boys," Harry began, smirking in a self-deprecating way. "That's how Madam Pomfrey first explained it to me. I have a condition called intersexuality."

Percy waited for him to continue.

"You might understand better if I use the term *hermaphroditism*," Harry said with a moue of distaste, "but I don't like it."

Percy swallowed. "Okay."

“I didn’t find out until I was thirteen,” Harry continued. “On my birthday, no less. I had a really horrible pain in my gut, and someone took me to a healer. Professor Snape took me to Madam Pomfrey,” Harry clarified. “It’s, well, not obvious from the outside. I wear a binder for my chest. I let you see it, when you visited me in the infirmary. The bandage. Anyway, Madam Pomfrey worked it out.”

Harry took a shaky breath, squeezing his eyes shut. “I’ve got a pair of ovaries, and... I can’t have kids. And my kidneys are fucked up, so I’ve got to carry Calming Draughts all the time or else too much stress could kill me. I should probably take one right now. I’m freaking the fuck out.”

“Okay,” Percy said again, not knowing how else to respond. “Do you have one?”

“Yes,” Harry said, fumbling around in his pocket. “Yeah, I always have a few. Stupid bloody pocket. I can’t... Fucking *Cedric* called me a girl when I told him. That’s why I obliterated him. And, honestly, I don’t regret it. I never have.”

“That’s fine,” Percy said. Harry was panicking, in the most unusually controlled way Percy had ever seen. He took his wand from his pocket. “*Accio* Calming Draught.” Percy caught it awkwardly, nearly dropping his wand, but managed to pass the vial to Harry.

“Thanks,” Harry mumbled. His face had gone from frighteningly pale to a blotchy red. Harry pulled the cork out with his teeth and drank the potion in one swallow. Percy could see the effect the potion had immediately, watching as Harry’s shoulders relaxed, listening as his breathing slowed.

“You’re not a girl,” Percy said.

Harry shuddered, then looked up at him, his expression conflicted. Hopeful.

“You’re not,” Percy said firmly. “I have never been attracted to women.”

Harry spluttered, then put a hand over his mouth, his shoulders shaking with strained laughter.

“It’s true,” Percy said, feeling himself starting to blush. “I...well, suffice to say you feature prominently in many of my less noble thoughts.”

“Oh, god,” Harry said. He moved closer to Percy, and suddenly Percy was being hugged, Harry’s face pressed against his chest. Percy wrapped his arms around Harry’s shoulders.

“You’re ridiculous,” Harry mumbled. Percy didn’t care what Harry called him. Harry was holding him. Harry had a strong hand wrapped around the back of Percy’s neck, squeezing gently in a way that made his knees weak, kissing him so passionately that it made Percy feel he had finally done something right in his life.

In the Cups

Chapter Summary

May 1995

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Smiling to himself, Harry dropped the damp, preserved body of a cuckoo into his cauldron. Bubbles in bright green and pink formed as the cuckoo disintegrated. Harry poked at it with a ladle, then sighed dreamily.

He was happy.

In the weeks since Easter, Harry was repeatedly struck with the feeling. Percy didn't care. Percy liked him. Percy *wanted* him.

Harry's smile grew, and he sprinkled powered erumpent horn across the volatile surface of his potion. He had been doing his best to hide it from everyone. He didn't want anyone to ask what happened to him over Easter holiday. He couldn't tell them anyway, not only because of Percy's job, but because it was something that was for *them*. It was between him and Percy, and no one else.

He quietly chuckled as his potion thickened.

"What are you thinking of to warrant such an idiotic expression?"

Harry looked up at his dad and smirked. "The future Minister for Magic."

His dad covered his face in exasperation. "What are you brewing?"

Harry glanced into his cauldron, then at his Potions book. "Essence of Insanity."

It was just Harry in Potions that day. Everyone else was off taking the Apparition Test.

"Did you, perhaps, sample this concoction?" his dad asked.

Harry shook his head, smiling again. He couldn't help it. Percy was amazing. "I told Percy about me being intersex."

His dad was suddenly alert. "I hope for his sake that he had a favorable reaction."

Harry grinned. "Yeah, it was definitely *favorable*."

His dad's eye twitched.

"How was your date with Professor Burbage?" Harry asked, cracking a few uncommon loon eggs into his cauldron. He tossed the shells in too.

His dad cleared his throat. "I see you have this potion well under hand. Carry on, Evans."

Harry started laughing as his dad fled into his office.

May was happening far too quickly. Harry couldn't spend all of his time thinking about Percy, not with exams and tournaments and little brothers in mortal peril.

It was the first year since he had joined the gobstones team that Harry was not playing in the tournament. There had been objections, confusion, tears, but Harry brushed it off. Not everyone was getting a chance to play against other houses. He wasn't the only player on the team, and when he graduated they needed to be strong enough to carry on without him. Killian had also bowed out, but was still standing next to Harry as they observed the matches against Ravenclaw.

Tracey, Bridget, and Derek had been the winners of the preliminary matches. Tracey's pigtailed crackled with tiny bolts of lightning as she faced off against Luna. To Harry's surprise, Monty had shown up to support her. He knew that Angelina Johnson was having the Gryffindor quidditch team practice every day. The Quidditch Cup, and the House Cup, were on the line.

Tracey pushed up her glasses, the lenses flashing menacingly at Luna. Luna pushed hair behind her ear and hummed to herself, opened her gobstones case, picking out her kyanite-in-marble gobstones one by one. It was the set Captain Lament had bought for Luna, after she had demolished Luna's previous set. Harry was glad to see the gobstones were all in excellent condition.

Bridget had already begun her campaign of destruction against Michael Corner, who seemed relieved he wasn't playing against Tracey. She *was* mumbling to herself in a rather unsettling way. Derek had drawn the short stick, and was in a match against the Ravenclaw team captain, Amina Randle, a sixth-year.

Harry crossed his arms, listening to the soothing *crack* of gobstones, cries of dismay and groans of disgust, polite claps and subdued cheers. Harry walked past the games, a general surveying his troops. Professor Sprout was busy chastising Tracey, who had developed the habit of cursing every time she lost a stone. Luna was learning many new words that day.

Derek looked like he was getting frustrated, so Harry paused by his game. Derek was a second-year, and next to Mafalda—who was attempting to loom over Michael Corner—was their youngest player. Harry knew that, for some kids, it was hard being at Hogwarts when

you knew you were no longer welcome at home. Gobstones was a way to release some of that frustration. But, Derek also wanted to win, and when up against a girl who had four more years experience, it wasn't looking good.

Derek growled at another lost gobstone. He was close to throwing the whole game. Harry worried that he had put too much emphasis on winning. They were competitive stoners, true, but it was also meant to be fun. Even when losing.

Nevertheless, it was a good experience for Derek. When the game was over, Derek would see that no one was upset with him for not winning, that it wasn't as serious as he thought it was.

Harry walked away to watch the other games, narrowly avoiding being hosed down by a bottle-washer Harry suspected might be tampered with. Professor Sprout hadn't noticed, too busy making sure Michael Corner hadn't lost an eye.

If only the stakes were always that low.

Monty was counting the days until he learned about the Third Task. Then he would count the days until the Third Task, then the days until school ended, then the days until he could return to Hogwarts. He was doing a lot of counting, which was helpful as Professor Trelawney had them back on horoscopy and it involved a lot of maths.

He was in the library with Neville, Hermione, and Ron. The two other boys were also in Divination, so Monty was helping them with their daily charts. Neville was mostly working on his own, occasionally checking his work against Monty's. Ron, Monty suspected, was making stuff up. He hadn't kicked the habit, since his increasingly dire predictions were always popular with Professor Trelawney. Monty knew it wouldn't do any good when they took their O.W.L.s, but Ron dismissed that as a problem for next year.

Hermione was still obsessing over Rita Skeeter, and Monty had no idea how to get her to stop. The Easter egg incident had stoked the fire.

Monty hadn't fully believed Harry when he said Ron and Mrs. Weasley were alike, but the chocolate Easter eggs had convinced him. He, Ron, Ginny, and Mafalda had all got massive chocolate eggs filled with homemade toffee. Monty only knew about Mafalda's as the girl had been toting it around with her everywhere. Fred and George had got an egg to split between them, which neither seemed much bothered by. Monty couldn't guess why they had been slighted by their own mother. Was it because of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes? Or was it, as Monty worried, because George had gone to the Yule Ball with Harry? Monty didn't think George fancied boys, but he had been tight lipped about *why* he had gone with Harry.

At least the twins got one of the dragon-sized eggs. The one Hermione had got was a complete joke. And while Monty knew it was nice of Mrs. Weasley to send anything at all, he thought it was shitty of her to send one of Ron's friends a big egg, and the other a tiny one.

It was all because of that *Witch Weekly* article, claiming that Hermione had jilted Monty or whatever rubbish. Monty had no idea why Mrs. Weasley was so offended on his behalf. He noticed that Luna hadn't got an egg at all, despite having been friends with Ginny for years, and the Lovegoods being neighbors to the Weasleys.

Monty had shared his with Luna.

He set his quill down and put his head in his hands.

"Hermione," he said, "have you done revision charts for exams yet?"

"Exams?" she said. "Why are you studying for exams?"

Monty turned his head to look at her. "Because I'm taking exams, why else?"

"You what?" Ron exclaimed, immediately getting shushed by some exhausted fifth-years at another table. He scowled, then lowered his voice. "What do you mean you're taking exams? I thought champions didn't have to!"

"Yeah, well, I am," Monty said, closing his eyes. Exams, quidditch, tournament. It was all coming to a head.

"Are you mental?" Ron asked. "Why would you take them if you don't have to?"

Monty sighed, then sat up. "Because I want to be a prefect."

Ron's jaw dropped. "What?"

Hermione also looked stunned. "That's right, fifth-year prefects! I can't believe I forgot about that..."

"Why do you want to be a *prefect*?" Ron asked, his mouth twisting in distaste

"My mum was a prefect," Monty said quietly. There was nothing wrong with being a prefect.

Ron blinked, then started turning red. "Oh."

"She was also Head Girl," Monty continued. "And my dad was Head Boy."

"Really?" Hermione asked. "I didn't know that."

"I did," Neville said, drawing a sharp look from Hermione. Neville shrugged. "Gran told me."

"So that's why I'm taking exams," Monty finished. "And that's why I need to study."

Ron stared at him for a moment, then shook his head and smiled. "Well, I mean, if that's what you want. Good luck, mate. Better you than me! Can't even imagine what Fred and George would do to me..."

Monty relaxed. He had held off telling Ron because he was worried it would become another issue between them.

“What about the Third Task?” Hermione asked. “Shouldn’t you be practicing for that? We should have been doing that this whole time! I’m so sorry, Monty, this Skeeter stuff is really —”

“It’s fine,” Monty said, cutting her off. How could he tell her he had no intention of winning the tournament? That whoever had put his name in *wanted* him to win, wanted it enough they would try to kill Harry just to get him out of the way? He wasn’t sure where to begin, or if anyone would even believe him. Especially when he had got the information from Harry, something else he couldn’t share.

“There’s no use worrying until I know what it is,” he ultimately said. “So, revision charts?”

“You’ve been really out of it lately.”

Harry blinked, then looked up from his drink. He had no idea what it was, only that it wasn’t gillywater.

It was a Hogsmeade weekend, and he had gone with his friends. They were all crammed together at a table in the Three Broomsticks. Not all of them had passed the Apparition Test the first try. Phoebe had splinched off a leg, and Terence had apparated into the middle of a busy muggle street. Cassius wouldn’t say what happened during his test.

“He’s been like that since Easter,” Astrid said, poking Harry in the side.

“I bet it’s got something to do with Weasley,” Adrian, the traitor, said.

“Merlin, it *does*,” Jasmine said, leaning forward. “Look at his face!”

“Do one,” Harry muttered, taking another sip. He raised his eyebrows. It was firewhiskey. All of his friends were already of age, and Harry had two guesses as to who would have slipped him one.

Phoebe swayed dramatically, the back of a hand pressed to her forehead, crushing Felipe in the process. “I need one of those couches people faint on.”

“A fainting couch?” Harry suggested.

“Yeah, that.”

Astrid poked him in the side again. “Well?”

“Well what?” Harry said. “A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“So there was kissing involved?” Jasmine asked.

Harry threw his head back, groaning in annoyance.

“I suggest we cease this line of inquiry,” Cassius said, surprising Harry. “You are implying a conflict of interest, which could have severe reputational consequences.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, sitting up. “Stop sullyng my reputation.”

“So there was sullyng?” Jasmine asked.

“Quidditch,” Harry said abruptly.

“That’s not going to work, mate,” Terence said, just as Astrid slammed her fist on the table.

“You should’ve picked a quidditch Weasley,” she muttered. “Someone needs to take one for the team.”

Jasmine turned to Astrid and smiled sweetly. “How’s Spinnet?”

“Sit and Spinnet,” Adrian said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Astrid narrowed her eyes. “None of your bloody business is how.”

Harry knew from Astrid’s slight obsession with the girl that Alicia Spinnet was currently at quidditch practice. The Gryffindor team had skipped Hogsmeade for last minute training. Astrid had been on edge all day.

He took another sip of firewhiskey, closing his eyes as his friends squabbled good-naturedly. The rich, spicy flavor coated his tongue. Caramel, oak, cinnamon, fire. It made his nose tingle, his throat numb, and slipped into his stomach to burn pleasantly. The sensation spread throughout his body, suffusing Harry with warmth. The liquor went straight to his head. He had never had anything stronger than butterbeer.

Harry tried to pace himself. He felt so inexplicably *good*, so relaxed. It was better than Calming Draughts, which he had long grown sick of. He knew it was a dangerous line of thought. He was from Cokeworth, where even the teenagers drank and drugged themselves into a stupor. His dad rarely spoke of his parents, but Harry knew that Tobias Snape had been an alcoholic. It ran in the family. And Harry felt, instinctively, that he could easily develop a habit. It was tempting. The stress, the anxiety, the pain that had haunted him all year had faded into the background, washed over by the liquor his body was soaking up like a desiccated sponge.

Astrid shoved a glass of water in front of him. Harry looked at her in surprise.

“You’re a lightweight,” she said firmly. “Drink.”

Harry blinked, then picked up the glass. He couldn’t remember if he had eaten anything that day. His friends were right, he *was* out of it. He’d been going through the motions for months. Increasingly, the only things that felt real were Percy and Monty, and his focus had

been almost exclusively on keeping his brother alive through the tournament. On discovering what his brother's scar meant, what his dream meant, what any of it meant. And he knew next to nothing. Harry was lost. He was struggling to get through his normal life when something more important, something perilous and unknown, lurked in the shadows.

"How *is* Spinnet?" Harry asked quietly.

Astrid leaned against him. "She doesn't know if she fancies girls, but she's not opposed to it."

Harry frowned into his glass of water.

"We've snogged a few times," Astrid admitted quietly. The others were now pestering Cassius about apparition, but he wouldn't budge no matter how many times Phoebe brought up her splinched leg. It had been reattached, of course, but a splinching like that wasn't something one got over quickly.

"What about Weasley?" she asked.

Harry smiled faintly. "He knows about me."

Astrid pulled back, her eyebrows shooting up. "You told him *that*?"

Harry nodded, still smiling. "Yeah. He's fine with it. I don't even think he cares. It's totally irrelevant to him."

Astrid frowned in consideration. "Less of a prat than I thought."

Harry chuckled. "He's great. But Cas is right, it would be bad for him if it got out we're involved."

"No, yeah," Astrid said, running a hand over her head. She had kept it shaved. Harry thought it suited her. Astrid suddenly checked her watch. "Bloody hell, we need to get back!"

"What?" Phoebe exclaimed.

"The match starts in *five* hours!"

"Welcome, one and all, to the final quidditch match of the year!" Lee Jordan announced. "Gryffindor and Ravenclaw! Today, I am joined once again by the Slytherin Gobstones Team Captain, Slytherin Prefect, and Slytherin Triwizard Champion, Slytherin Harry Evans!"

"Thank you, Lee," Harry said evenly, causing the other boy to splutter at the familiarity. "It is an honor to be here. My only hope is that the upcoming gobstones match between Gryffindor and Slytherin will have a similar turnout."

“The honor is *all* mine, Harry,” Lee said with a calculating look in his eyes. Harry had been accosted on his way back to the castle. He would have rejected Lee’s proposal, had Lee not pointed out it would look good on Harry’s Head Boy application.

He scanned the heaving stands. The entire school was packed into them. He spotted Luna in the Ravenclaw stands, holding up a large banner of a griffin, half lion and half eagle, on a purple background.

It wasn’t only students and staff in audience. Harry saw with amusement that Sirius Black had forced his way into the professor’s stand, and was sitting next to Professor Lupin.

Lee announced the players, Madam Hooch released the balls, and the game was on.

“Captain Roger Davies, famous ladies man—”

“Jordan!”

“—leading his chasers. And we have Seeker Chang, I believe this is her third year on the team. She’s had a number of injuries. Harry?”

Harry gave Lee a flat look. “There is definitely room for growth. Ravenclaw has often played a reactive game, which is why they struggle against an aggressive team such as Gryffindor.”

Lee pulled the bullhorn back. “And we can see that aggression now as Beater Weasley takes aim for Chaser Bradley! It’s *not* in Gryffindor’s interest to end this game early.”

Lee wasn’t entirely correct. While Gryffindor needed at least four hundred points to get into first place, a long game wasn’t ideal for Gryffindor. McLaggen was a competent keeper, when he was actually playing the game and not busy yelling at the Gryffindor chasers.

“Manfred and Georgius have something of a reputation for finishing early,” Harry said blandly. Fred nearly fell off his broom, giving Harry an appalled look.

"Evans!"

“You *would* know that, wouldn’t you,” Lee muttered, unfortunately *into* the bullhorn.

“Jordan! Not another word!”

Lee cleared his throat. “And we have Seeker Potter on his Firebolt,” he said. “Not ideal for Chang, who is still flying a Comet Two Sixty. Evans?”

“Back to formalities, are we?” Harry said, smirking. “Whereas the wand chooses the wizard, those with some knowledge of broom enchantments know that the broom does *not* make the quidditch player. Some people, Jordan, view brooms as simply tools. A means to an end. This is reductive. There is a synchronicity between the broom and the flier. Brooms respond to the flier’s magic, relying on it to a significant extent. That is why some people are so-called *natural* fliers. They are, in a very literal sense, more connected to their brooms than others.”

“Evans, this is not a Charms theory lecture!” Professor McGonagall shouted. “Focus on the *game!*”

“Fascinating stuff,” Lee said. “And Spinnet scores! That’s twenty-nought, Gryffindor. So you’re saying it doesn’t matter which broom Potter is on? That almost sounds like a compliment!”

Harry sighed. “It’s no secret in our house that there have been favorable comparisons between Potter and Regulus Black, who is generally considered the greatest Slytherin seeker of the past century. May he rest in peace.”

Monty stopped flying to stare at him, narrowly avoiding a bludger that whizzed by. It was, perhaps, in poor taste for Harry to compare his brother to his brother’s godfather’s dead Death Eater younger brother. But it was true, Regulus Black had been a fantastic seeker. And not many people knew he had been a Death Eater.

Lee gave him an alarmed look. “Rest in peace. Davies takes a shot and a McLaggen...misses, that’s twenty-ten, Gryffindor.”

Harry watched his brother visibly collect himself then shoot across the pitch. Cho gave chase, puttering along on her Comet. Harry stopped himself from praising his brother too much. In his honest opinion, Monty could outfly almost anyone, even if he was riding a hoover.

He wasn’t surprised, hours later, when Monty finally caught the snitch. It was after Alicia scored a goal that pushed Gryffindor to two hundred sixty points. Just enough to win the Quidditch Cup.

Harry knew that, if Astrid hadn’t shaved it all off, she would be tearing her hair out, but at that moment Harry didn’t care. His brother was being carried around on Fred and George’s shoulders, lifting the Quidditch Cup above his head, his friends swarming the pitch to celebrate. He was incredibly happy for his brother. Harry only wished he could celebrate with him.

Thank you for all of your comments! A lot of thoughtful, insightful stuff going on as we steadily approach the Third Task.

The hot cross buns were purchased, not homemade, and I hope the egg controversy has been...laid...to rest hahahahaha

Dandelions

Chapter Summary

May 1995

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The house-elves were running around the kitchens, cleaning up after dinner. It was all background noise to Harry, and strangely helped him concentrate. With something to ignore, he was able to focus on his Head Boy application. He had been on edge all day, waiting to be summoned. They were finally going to learn about the Third Task.

Harry dipped his quill, gently tapping off the excess ink. It had to be perfect. Absolutely perfect. He had written and discarded numerous passages. He wanted to write an account of everything he had done for the school, but it all sounded like he was bragging. Conceited.

Harry wasn't conceited. All of it could be traced back to Monty, doing what he had to do to protect his brother. Even the bloody troll, when Monty and his friends had popped up out of nowhere. Even his *marks*. He had never received anything less than full marks on an assignment. Harry knew he was smart, but it wasn't in an effortless way. He pushed himself. Harry had limits, and he needed to surpass them. He couldn't afford to be mediocre, skating by on minimum effort.

A house-elf refilled his cup of coffee, and Harry nodded in thanks. That was the main reason he had slunk down to the kitchens. He was close to asking Madam Pomfrey how he could get supplied intravenously.

Lady Madeleine was stretched out in front of a fire, her eyes closed, utterly content in her sleep. Sometimes Harry felt she was the only thing keeping him sane.

Harry knew what sort of enemies his brother had. He knew what the Dark Lord was. A genius, a prodigy, relentless, obsessed, charming, manipulative, someone who boldly sought out and mastered magics few were aware of, and fewer dared contemplate. The Dark Lord was power incarnate, and people debased themselves to simply be in his presence. Harry was a dirt poor, may-as-well-be mudblood from the arse end of nowhere, with a body that threatened to do him in every other week and a parentage that would have both sides clamoring for his blood.

And he was good at gobstones.

Exams were in a few weeks. People were getting frantic. While losing out on the Quidditch Cup had been a major let down, Slytherin was still in the running for the House Cup. It was a

rare moment in history: if they won the Gobstones Trophy that weekend, they would likely win the House Cup. Derek was feeling the pressure, which made Harry wish he had knuckled down and played in the tournament himself.

He shook his head and began writing. How could he spin *maimed the Giant Squid* as a good thing?

The door to the kitchens opened, and Harry turned around. It was his dad, who had an impressively bored expression at being in such a hectic place.

“Your presence is required on the quidditch pitch, Evans,” his dad said. “Ludo Bagman awaits your pleasure.”

Harry covered his mouth, gagging at the traumatizing image that conjured. His dad was the worst. He knew Harry couldn’t respond how he normally would with so many house-elves around.

“Yes, sir,” Harry managed to say, scowling at his dad’s obvious amusement. This was revenge for Harry calling his *meeting with a colleague* a *date*. Which it definitely had been.

His dad smirked, then fucked off back to the dungeons where he prowled and loomed and did whatever else ostensibly dark wizards did in their underground lairs to preserve their iniquitous reputations.

Harry packed up his things and headed onto the grounds, collecting himself as he walked. His dad had been pushing him both in dueling and occlumency. Harry knew his mental state had been all over the place. He let himself lower his defenses around his dad, his friends sometimes, Monty, and Percy. And of those, he could count on one hand those with whom he dealt with in honesty. As honest as he could be.

His dad had been practicing occlumency for nearly two decades; like Harry, he was a born occlumens. Some sort of Prince family legacy, as far as Harry could tell. He was better at managing his emotions than Harry was, having only a couple years of practice.

Monty was turning fifteen soon. That was the age Harry’s dad said occlumency training could begin in earnest. Harry was debating whether he should take a role in that, or if he needed an intermediary. He hoped Monty trusted him enough to agree, but Harry wasn’t an expert in legilimency. His dad already had to take care of one of his messes. He didn’t want someone else to put Monty’s brain back together if he fucked up. He didn’t know if Sirius Black or Professor Lupin were proficient in the mind arts, and it would be strange if Monty asked them apropos of nothing. There was no reason for Monty to even *know* about occlumency.

Harry wiped the scowl from his face as he neared the quidditch pitch.

“Hey!”

He stopped walking, turning to see Monty hurrying towards him.

“Good evening, Potter,” Harry said, smirking as his brother rolled his eyes. “Congratulations on your victory.”

Monty smiled at him briefly. “Yeah, about that. Why did you say all that stuff about Regulus?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Because it’s true.”

“You know he was Sirius’ brother?” Monty asked.

“I do,” Harry said.

“He wasn’t happy about you bringing him up,” Monty said. “I think he’s still messed up about it.”

Harry sighed. Sirius Black was *messed up* about a lot of things.

Monty stepped closer to him. “Sirius says Voldemort killed him.”

“Perhaps,” Harry said, wondering where Monty was going with this.

“You said one of your—”

“Let me stop you right there,” Harry said quickly, looking around. He had thought Monty was over the whole *who are your parents* thing. “Just...don’t, okay? I know what you’re thinking, and all I will say is that you’re wrong.”

“Oh,” Monty said, deflating. “Sorry.”

Harry sighed, then ruffled Monty’s hair. It was funny how annoyed it made his brother. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s find out what the fuck’s going on.”

Monty gaped at the quidditch pitch. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes, not trusting that what he was seeing was real.

Harry was crouched down next to one of the plants that had overtaken the once perfectly smooth pitch. There was a *snap*, and Monty saw Harry slip his hand into a pocket. Harry stood, straightening his robes.

“Just a sample,” he said with a smirk. “Maybe your mate Longbottom can identify it.”

Ludo Bagman was waving and shouting at them from the center of the maze. With him stood Krum and Delacour. Monty hadn’t seen much of Delacour, but he’d seen Krum in the library plenty of times, usually with Hermione. If the goal was to build international magical camaraderie, it had been a huge miss, at least for Monty. He knew some other students, like

Hermione, Parvati, others whose names he didn't know, had made friends among the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students. Hermione hadn't introduced him or Ron to Krum, despite her spending so much time with Krum since the Yule Ball. Ron, Monty could understand. But why hadn't she wanted to introduce Monty?

Maybe she thought he needed no introduction. His reputation as the Boy-Who-Lived preceded him.

"They're hedges," Monty said as he navigated the maze of plants.

Maze. It was a maze.

"Yeah," Harry said, looking around. "Alright, I can work with this."

Monty didn't get a chance to ask for clarification as Bagman had begun speaking. Monty learned that the Third Task required them to navigate the maze, and to search for the Triwizard Cup which would be located in the center.

"Hagrid will be providing a number of creatures," Bagman said, bouncing in a childish way. "And there will be obstacles. Spells to break, that sort of thing!"

Monty nodded along as Bagman said he would be entering first, followed by Harry, Krum, and Delacour. Delacour had a sour expression; she had never quite warmed up to anyone. Monty imagined it must have been galling to be the only girl champion, and to be in last place. Not that it mattered if she got to the Triwizard Cup first. She was part veela, maybe she would burn the entire maze down for them.

"If Hagrid is providing the creatures, who will be setting the spells?" Harry asked.

Bagman, who had been avoiding looking in Harry's direction, stopped bouncing. "Ah, yes, your professors of course!"

"Of course," Harry said drily. "Can you elucidate upon these obstacles? Will it only be creatures and spells to break?"

"Elucidate?" Bagman said. "No, no, that would be telling! It's, ah, a bit chilly out here, isn't it? Let's head back to the castle!"

Monty noticed Harry didn't move. Instead, he was scrutinizing the maze. Was he trying to memorize it? Monty left him to it, making his way out of the maze with the others. Bagman looked like he wanted to say something to Monty, but Monty was saved when Krum tapped him on the shoulder.

"Could I have a word?"

Harry narrowed his eyes at the sight of Viktor Krum leading his brother out of the stadium.

“Meow.”

Lady Madeleine had been slinking on her stomach, and playfully leapt at Harry. Harry smiled and bent down to scratch her ears.

“Creatures and spells,” Harry said musingly. “Hagrid and the professors.” He looked around the maze again, wondering if Bagman had been instructed to actually show them the maze, and why it hadn’t been made off-limits. Unless the hedges moved, it would be far too easy to map. Bagman had said the hedge would grow to twenty feet, which meant the interior would be visible from the stands. That would give the audience the chance to warn champions of danger, which again would undermine the maze aspect of the Third Task. There would have to be some sort of canopy to it, otherwise they could all just summon brooms and fly to the center. Or bring brooms with them, as Bagman hadn’t said they would only be allowed their wands.

Harry sighed. While he admired Percy’s work ethic, and acknowledged that Percy respected Crouch for *his* work ethic, the whole tournament had been a stupid idea that was executed poorly. He snapped another twig off. Why was Hagrid growing the hedge and not Professor Sprout?

Harry frowned, standing straight to get another look at the maze. It didn’t matter who grew it.

He headed out of the maze and the stadium, following Lady Madeleine as she tracked down Monty. If Krum tried anything on his brother...

Krum had led Harry’s brother close to the Beauxbatons carriage, right up to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Harry waited quietly in the murky shadow of the carriage, watching Krum and his brother talk. Krum was taller than Monty, and looked like he was intimidating him. But there weren’t wands drawn, and Monty seemed more irritated than anything. Then Krum’s posture changed, becoming almost amicable.

It wasn’t a long conversation. Eventually they parted ways, Krum back to the Durmstrang ship, Monty up to the castle. Lady Madeleine dashed towards him, attacking Monty’s robes in a very kittenish way. Harry cast a silencing charm and waited.

“What was that for?” Monty asked when Lady Madeleine succeeded in dragging him towards Harry.

“What did Krum want?” Harry asked.

“To ask me about Hermione,” Monty said. “It’s been *months* since that article. When the fuck are people going to stop talking about it?”

“Sorry about that,” Harry offered.

Monty shook his head. “It’s not your fault. And what are *you* doing?”

“Spying on you,” Harry said, snorting at his brother’s expression. “No, I wanted to talk to you about my plan.”

Monty raised his eyebrows. “You’ve already got a plan? Is it even possible to plan for that?”

“Yeah,” Harry said to both questions, smiling as Lady Madeleine chased a knarl she had scared out of its burrow. He met Monty’s eyes. “I need you to do me a favor.”

Monty ran up to Gryffindor Tower. Harry had said all the way back when they’d finished the Second Task that the Third Task would probably involve retrieving something. First an egg, then a person, now a cup. Harry had also speculated there would be creatures involved, like in the First and Second Tasks. The difference now was the quantity of creatures. And, if Hagrid was providing them, that gave Monty a good idea of how dangerous the creatures would be.

Harry told him not to worry about that part. Monty *wasn’t* worried. He had been interested in creatures since second year. Since meeting Luna, honestly. He was at the top of the class in Care, he read about creatures just for fun, and he talked with Luna and Neville about various creatures a lot as it was relevant to all of their interests. True, Neville’s interests were more dung-based, but even that was a fertile ground for conversation.

Monty paused to catch his breath at the portrait hole.

“*Hic sunt leones*,” he said.

“Truer words,” the Fat Lady replied jovially, swinging open. Monty climbed inside, waving to a few people as he hurried to his dormitory.

“What’s the Third Task?” Ron called out.

Everyone stopped what they were doing to listen in, and Monty briefly closed his eyes in annoyance. He turned to see Ron and Hermione playing chess. Krum had said Hermione talked about him a lot. Him, and not Ron. Monty didn’t think Hermione liked him *that* way, at least he had never got that impression. Why did she avoid talking about Ron?

“I’ll tell you later,” Monty said, quickly heading out of the common room. He needed to talk to Sirius.

Neville was in their dormitory, happily taking care of a few potted plants he’d added to the area.

“Hey, Monty,” he said, smiling kindly.

“Hey, Nev,” he said. He pulled the hedge cutting Harry had given him from his pocket. “Mind giving this a look? Not sure what it is.”

Neville nodded, taking the needled stem, then went back to his pruning. Monty knew Hermione and Ron pestered him about things because they cared about him, but it was honestly so nice to have someone take him at face value and not interrogate him about every little thing.

He jumped onto his bed, pulling his curtains closed. Knowing Skeeter was an animagus, and Sirius having broken in before, had made Monty a little nervous about someone getting into his belongings. All of his most precious things were with him at Hogwarts. His invisibility cloak, the pictures of his parents, the Marauder's Map. Monty took this last item out of a pocket. That, along with his invisibility cloak and his two-way mirror, were things he carried with him at all times at Harry's insistence. Monty made sure to cast a silencing charm, and transfigured his curtains to stone. It was a neat trick, since the curtains looked exactly the same but would be impossible to pull open.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," Monty whispered, watching as ink spread across the map. He flipped it open, immediately seeking out the quidditch pitch. When he found it, Monty started laughing.

Harry had been absolutely right. The Marauder's Map had perfectly recreated the hedge maze.

Smiling to himself, Monty set the map aside and pulled out his mirror. "Sirius Black."

It didn't take long for Sirius to appear. Monty assumed he always carried his mirror too.

Sirius looked worn out. Monty knew his godfather didn't like being alone in Grimmauld Place, with only Kreacher and his mother's portrait for company. That was part of the reason Monty tried to talk to Sirius every day, and Remus had assured Monty that he regularly talked to Sirius via floo call. They were both at Hogwarts while Sirius was stuck dealing with Wizengamot stuff, and dealing with everything he had been through in Azkaban.

"What's up?" Sirius said, smiling faintly

"Nothing much," Monty said, propping the mirror up so he wouldn't have to hold it. "Are you feeling better?"

Sirius grimaced, running a hand through his long hair. It looked like he hadn't brushed it in a few days, which worried Monty. Sirius had stopped taking care of himself again.

"Yeah," Sirius said. "Bit of a shock to hear someone talk about Regulus. Merlin's beard... I never imagined it would be at a Gryffindor quidditch match. At least I know he's remembered for *something* good."

"Was he really that good of a seeker?" Monty asked tentatively.

Sirius's smile returned, though it looked wistful. "Yeah, my brother was brilliant. Best seeker Slytherin's ever had. I went to all of his games, even when he hated me. When we hated each other. Of course, when we played against each other he *really* couldn't stand me." He

refocused his eyes on Monty. “He wasn’t as good as you, though. You could play for England, kid!”

Monty smiled back, though he felt conflicted. He wished Harry had never brought up Regulus, even if it was as a compliment.

Sirius’ brother had died very young, but had also been a Death Eater. They had been in different houses, on different sides of the war. Regulus had died before Voldemort vanished, and no one knew how it had happened, or even *when*. It was a horrible thought. Monty could hardly imagine what Sirius felt.

“They told you about the Third Task tonight, yeah?” Sirius asked

“Yeah,” Monty said absently, trying to get his thoughts in order. “It’s a maze. But that’s not important”

Sirius frowned. “Did something else happen?”

Monty shifted slightly. “Mind if I ask you a favor?”

Harry waited until the weekend to make his move.

It was the evening before the final gobstones tournament match. He needed to blow off some steam.

Monty had promised to take care of the favor, and had taken a cutting for Neville to identify. Harry didn’t know if the hedge was a magical plant, or an enchanted muggle one. If it was the latter, he doubted Neville would know what it was. He had to assume the hedge would not be easily done away with, and that it would have to be navigated.

Harry snuck out of the castle and made his way across the grounds. It was late, well past curfew, and the grounds were silent and dark. There were some lights on at the Durmstrang ship, still moored in the lake, and the Beauxbatons carriage, still parked near the abraxan paddock, but none of the students nor their heads of school were outside. The abraxan were all asleep. The Giant Squid was resting in the shallows, finally having left her self-imposed isolation. Harry still took a walk around the lake every day. He knew it wasn’t the Giant Squid’s fault, or Nessie’s fault. He wasn’t afraid of the water.

He ducked under the flailing branches of the Whomping Willow and approached Hagrid’s hut, Lady Madeleine trotting at his side. He could see Fang sleeping outside of the hut, sprawled in a doggy pile of one. It was a warm evening. It would be summer soon.

“Don’t,” Harry said quietly. Lady Madeleine had dropped to her stomach, clearly intent on pouncing on Fang’s tail. “You can play with him later.”

“Meow.”

Harry rolled his eyes, then knocked on Hagrid’s door.

“Coming,” he heard Hagrid grumble. “Bit late for visitors.”

The door opened, the frame filling with Hagrid’s bulk. Hagrid’s expression froze when he saw Harry.

“Good evening, Mr. Hagrid,” Harry said politely. Lady Madeleine darted between Hagrid’s legs and into the cabin. Harry made an aborted move to grab her. “Maddie, for fuck’s sake.” He grimaced. “Sorry about her, sir, she still thinks she’s a kitten. Do you mind if I come in?”

“Er, no, come on in,” Hagrid said awkwardly, stepping aside to make room. “It’s all right, half-kneazles don’t, uh, mature as quickly as your run-of-the-mill cat.”

“It’s still impolite of her, sir,” Harry said, looking around the cabin for his cat. It was only the second time Harry had been inside of Hagrid’s home, and not much had changed from the year before. It was one room, with a massive bed in one corner, various meats hanging from the rafters, a simple hewn table and chairs, the walls decorated with things gathered from the Forbidden Forest.

“No need for all that *sir* and *mister* stuff,” Hagrid said gruffly, shutting his door. “Did you need something, er, Mr. Evans?”

“Just *Harry* is fine,” Harry said, turning to look up at Hagrid. “I was hoping to clear the air between us. I know we’ve both had a rough go of it this year.”

“You could say that again,” Hagrid said bracingly, looking relieved. “Care for a spot of tea?”

“I wouldn’t mind something stronger,” Harry said with a disarming smile.

Hagrid hesitated. “Ah, well, reckon I owe you that. I’ve got some dandelion wine. Not much stronger than butterbeer, if I’m being honest.”

“That sounds lovely,” Harry said, taking a seat. Hagrid shuffled around his cabin, unearthing a huge jug filled with a sunshine yellow wine. There was a noise in the rafters, and Harry looked up to see Lady Madeleine gnawing on an aged ham. Hagrid sat heavily at the table, pouring them each a drink.

“Thank you,” Harry said, taking a sip. It was sweet and sparkling, and tasted like summer. He quite liked it.

“I would like to apologize for the skrewts,” Harry said, setting his cup down. “I know you were rather fond of them.”

Hagrid took a long drink, then set his tankard down. Harry was amused by the difference in size of their vessels. “It should be me who’s apologizing. Professor Snape tore me a new one, said I had no right to! You nearly died, Harry! It’s been eating me up inside.”

“Professor Snape acts *in loco parentis* for me when it comes to medical issues,” Harry explained gently. Hagrid blinked in confusion. “I’m an orphan, so when I’m sick it’s his responsibility to make decisions.”

Hagrid’s eyes started to water. “I never should have bred those blasted things! Killed each other off, they did.”

“I was curious about them,” Harry said, taking another sip. “That’s why I wanted to take a look. It was my own fault, really. No one could have predicted what happened.”

Hagrid shook his head. “I should’ve listened. No fire crabs, they said, and what do I do? Go and breed fire crabs!”

“I don’t blame you,” Harry said firmly. “It was an accident.”

“Should’ve known it was a bad sign when the bleeding manticores ate the fire crab,” Hagrid mumbled, finishing his drink and pouring himself another. “Ah, I think I need a bit more to get through this. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all,” Harry said. “Like I said, it’s been a rough year. How’s Buckbeak?”

Hagrid wiped his eyes. “He’s grand. Never been happier. After all you’ve done... and I go and put your life at risk! And you found out about that basilisk too. I knew it wasn’t Aragog!”

Hagrid drained his tankard and filled it again. Harry felt a little bad for distressing the man. Not enough to stop.

“Who’s Aragog?” Harry asked as Hagrid refilled both of their drinks. Harry waved his hand idly, wandlessly and silently refilling the jug of wine. He had been practicing all week to pull it off. Convincing Hagrid to drink had been far easier than Harry had expected. Now it was all a matter of getting him completely kaylied.

“An acromantula,” Hagrid said, setting his tankard down again. He held his hands about a foot apart. “Got him when he was this big!”

“How big is he now?” Harry asked.

“Big as an elephant!”

Harry held out his cup and Hagrid happily topped him up.

“That’s amazing,” Harry said, making a note to never allow his brother to enter the Forbidden Forest. He doubted he could keep Monty out, the kid had a bloody *invisibility cloak*. Who let an eleven-year-old run around with something like that? Harry was just glad Monty had some common sense, and that he’d managed to keep him out of trouble for the most part. Those bloody twin idiots were a terrible influence. God only knew what nonsense they were filling his brother’s head with during quidditch practices...

Harry snorted into his cup, realizing too late that he was getting tipsy. He needed to focus.

“I do feel guilty you lost your job as a professor,” Harry said, letting his expression fall.

Hagrid drained another tankard, then let out a long sigh. “I was never cut out for all that *professor* tot. Should’ve known my own limits. I let the headmaster down.”

“And then that Skeeter article came out,” Harry said, watching Hagrid slosh more wine into his tankard. “I could scarcely believe it. The nerve of that woman.”

Hagrid’s eyes began welling again. “Course they wouldn’t want a *halfbreed* to teach their children.”

“Nor a *mudblood* for their champion,” Harry muttered.

Hagrid gaped at him. “Don’t you go saying that about yourself, Harry!”

Harry sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Folk like us got to stick together, I reckon.”

Hagrid nodded emphatically. “That’s what Professor Dumbledore said. You know, he’s got a brother...”

Harry nodded along as Hagrid rambled about the headmaster and his goat-loving brother, making noises of agreement. Hagrid *really* liked Dumbledore. It smacked of the same kind of loyalty Professor Lupin had. The same kind of loyalty his own father had. Harry didn’t care for it all. He took measured sips from his wine, feeling somewhat fuzzy around the edges.

“You think Aragog’s going to be in the maze?” Harry asked once Hagrid had finished his rant.

“One of his great-great-great-grandkids,” Hagrid said, his voice slurred. “He’s getting up in the years, old Aragog. Over fifty, he is.”

“Impressive,” Harry said, carefully refilling the tankard as Hagrid drank from it. It was tricky, but he pulled it off without Hagrid noticing. “What else do you think’s going to be in there?”

Ten hours of maintenance? I don't know if I can make it.

Fount of Knowledge

Chapter Summary

May 1995

Chapter Notes

The ten hours starts in forty minutes. These are desperate times, friends.

Harry held on to the toilet for dear life. He pressed his head to the cool porcelain, simultaneously disgusted and relieved, and too disoriented to care. His stomach heaved again, and he hunched over the seat, reaching out desperately to flush before the stench hit him.

He was sprawled on the bathroom floor, wearing only his pants and his binder, having no idea how he had made it back to his dormitory. Or where his robes were. He had started transfiguring the wine into water at some point, which was the only thing that saved him. Lady Madeleine had to help give Hagrid the Forgetfulness Potion. Harry was pretty sure she had dropped the entire bottle into Hagrid's tankard. It was enough to dose a small country.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. He had to remember what Hagrid told him. He'd written most of it down right in Hagrid's hut. The parchment was in his robes, wherever they were.

Someone started banging on the door. Harry groaned. His head was already killing him. Whoever was knocking clearly wanted to finish him off.

"Fuck off," he mumbled. The banging continued unabated.

There was going to be a boggart, Harry remembered that one clearly. And a sphinx? No skrewts, those were all dead, thank fuck. The boggart was an issue for both him and Monty. That would be just fantastic if he ran into one of those while wearing Percy's enchanted mirror. Then everyone would see his brother's dead body falling out of a cupboard. Just fucking *fantastic*. Piece of shit fucking tournament.

The banging didn't stop.

"Fuck off!" Harry snapped, wincing at the sound of his own voice. He felt like death warmed up.

The door suddenly flew open, revealing Cassius holding his wand. Harry squinted at him.

“The bloody fuck do you want?” he mumbled.

“To take a piss,” Cassius said evenly.

“I’m busy,” Harry mumbled. He felt his stomach lurch, then quickly stuck his head in the toilet again. His head was splitting. He was never drinking again. “Lots of business in here.”

“What’s that, Haz?”

Harry groaned again. Adrian was so bloody *loud*.

“You look rough as a badger’s arse,” Adrian said, still incredibly fucking loud and chipper and the worst.

“Never seen Cedric’s arse,” Harry mumbled.

“What’s happened?” Terence asked, adding to Harry’s suffering.

“I need the loo, but Harry’s got a business meeting,” Cassius explained.

“What’s wrong with him?” Terence asked. “Why’s he got that bandage?”

“For fuck’s sake,” Harry slurred, looking down at his chest. How was he going to explain this?

“Hang on, is Harry drunk?” Terence asked.

“I was,” Harry mumbled forlornly. “Now I’m just a miserable sod.”

“You were getting shitfaced last night?” Adrian asked. “Should’ve invited us!”

“To Hagrid’s hut?” Harry said, covering his eyes. Everything was too bright and too loud and he felt like utter shite.

“You were drinking with *Hagrid*?” Cassius asked. “No wonder you’re like this. I’m surprised you’re still breathing.”

Harry hurled into the toilet again.

“Why?” Terence asked.

“*In vino veritas*,” Harry said, coughing. His throat was raw. His mouth tasted like the bottom of a bin. “Sings like a bloody canary.”

“Alright,” Adrian said. Harry heard steps moving towards him. “Let’s get him into bed.”

“He is likely dehydrated,” Cassius said.

“No shit,” Harry mumbled, feeling himself being hauled up. “Adrian, if you try to cop a feel I will curse you inside out. Your insides will become your outsides.”

“You think so highly of me,” Adrian said happily. He was being surprisingly gentle. “Terry, get the door.”

“Isn’t the gobstones final tonight?” Terence said quietly.

“Shit,” Harry said, squeezing his eyes shut. “Shit. Fuck. *Accio* fucking...something....”

“Ah!”

“Don’t let him do magic!”

“*Protego!*”

Harry woke up again when he hit the floor.

“Ah, shit,” he said, pushing himself up on shaking arms.

“Morning, sunshine,” Adrian said.

“Time is it?”

“Around four in the afternoon,” Adrian said. Harry could tell he was just *loving* this. “You should ask what *day* it is.”

Harry jerked in alarm, then looked up at Adrian. “Don’t tell me, I’ve bloody missed the final matches?”

Adrian was straining to suppress a smile, then he burst out into laughter.

“Not funny, mate,” Harry said, hauling himself onto his bed. “I feel like I’ve been run over.”

“Astrid went down to the kitchens,” Adrian said, pointing at the piles of food on the floor near Harry’s bed. “She told me to tell you she told you you’re a lightweight.”

“Cheers,” Harry said, plopping on the floor. Food, water. Find his robes. Creatures in the maze. Gobstones. “God, I’m knackered.”

Adrian snickered. “By the way, Astrid said she’d castrate us if we told anyone about that.” Adrian pointed at Harry’s chest. “Did you get hurt? Get a little frisky with Hagrid?”

Harry sighed. “I’m fine.”

“Why were you drinking with him?” Adrian asked, dropping the bandage issue.

“Didn’t I say?”

There was a muffled *meow*, and Lady Madeleine crawled out from under Harry’s bed, a set of robes in her mouth. Harry smiled weakly, reaching down to scratch her back. “Thanks, love. Such a good cat.”

“You were mostly trying to cast spells before you passed out,” Adrian said. “It was a madhouse in here.”

Harry grimaced. “Sorry about that. I went down to his hut to get him drunk so he’d tell me what creatures will be in the maze.”

Adrian nodded thoughtfully. “Sneaky git.”

Harry grinned. “Bloody well worked, didn’t it? Now, did I miss the finals or not?”

“No,” Adrian relented. “But Killian’s been raising hell in the common room. We’ve been telling people you were ill. He tried to get in, wanted to drag you to the infirmary.”

Harry flopped onto his bed because the floor hurt too much. He had never felt so terrible in his entire life. He wanted to go home, wherever that was.

“You really should eat something,” Adrian said in a serious tone. Harry squinted at him. “You need to be more careful with yourself, Harry.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, sinking to the floor again and pulling a tray of warm, flaky pasties towards himself. “I know.”

Harry was perfectly composed. He had clean robes, his hair was smoothed down, he felt like his eyeballs were coated in sand, he had managed to survive a shower without drowning. His stomach sloshed unpleasantly with all the water and potions he had consumed to offset the horrific amount of dandelion wine he had consumed. He had painstakingly combed over his memories of the previous night, a night which had extended nearly to dawn, culminating when Hagrid blacked out on the floor. Harry’s transfiguration from wine to water had not been entirely successful. When he got back to his dormitory, he had felt too hot and had taken off his robes, then stumbled to the bathroom to throw everything up. It was his own fault for trying to keep up with a half-giant. He had almost no tolerance for alcohol, and he hoped to never develop one.

He felt like such an incompetent arse, hungover at the last gobstones games of the year. He had made his friends worried, and his team worried. Derek had been beside himself when Harry finally emerged from his dormitory. Even Mafalda looked relieved to see he was alright.

The turnout was phenomenal, the largest Harry had ever seen. At least three dozen people milled about the Great Hall, listening to the dulcet tones of gobstones clacking against each other, the sound of gobstones spraying the unfortunate, far too similar to the sound of Harry vomiting. It made his already tender stomach churn. He did not want to connect such a noble sport with projectile vomiting. He would not taint gobstones with his own poor decision-making.

His dad obviously knew something was up. Harry avoided looking at him. He already felt bad enough. He knew he'd been careless. Again. He didn't want to disappoint his dad.

It was Tracey, Bridget, and Derek against Lee, Neville, and a second-year girl named Romilda Vane. Fate was on their side, as Derek was up against Romilda, and Tracey was taking on Lee.

"Still playing with sodalite, I see," Harry quietly observed as he passed Lee.

"It's iolite," Lee said.

"Keep telling yourself that, Jordan," Harry said. "One has but to scratch the surface to reveal the mediocrity of this faded carbon copy."

"I can't understand what you're saying half the time," Lee said.

"Just the lightest scratch," Harry continued, "to transfer the proof, writ large, of your duplicity."

"It's *iolite*," Lee snapped. "Go monologue somewhere else, Evans. I've got a game to win."

"A likely story," Harry said, walking away. "A *very* likely story."

"Woe unto you," Tracey declared, pointing at Lee. "Woe betide thee evermore, scoundrel! A pox upon your house, you scurrilous cur! Fie! Fie, I say!"

Professor Burbage, who was standing suspiciously close to his dad, began clapping.

"Miss Davis, if you could please begin the game," Professor Flitwick said, hurrying over.

Harry crossed his arms, closing his eyes to fight down the urge to vomit. He had developed a sort of nose blindness to gobstone fluids over the years, but his reduced state had stripped him of all defenses. His head pounded with every step. He wished he had crawled to his dad's office and asked for help. His dad might have taken pity on him. Maybe. Probably not. He liked to let Harry suffer the consequences of his own actions. Lesson learned. Mischief managed.

Monty had brought his friends along. Luna, who had an impressive showing by winning all of her matches, save her first one against Tracey. Hermione, who had a strained smile. Ron, who actually seemed interested. Monty had thrown a towel over Neville's shoulders like he was a prizefighter, and was whispering encouragement to him. Fred and George had turned out for Lee, and now that Harry was further away they had flanked their friend, well within

the splash zone. The Creevey brothers were there, as well as a few first- and second-years from Gryffindor

There were also the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw gobstones teams. Haruka Endo was watching the games like a hawk. Harry didn't like to think about putting someone in their place, but Haruka had been a thorn in his side for ages. He had no idea why Cho Chang wasn't getting the same treatment. Everyone seemed to adore the girl, and she was very popular among the fifth-years. Harry found her unforgivably bland.

He paused near Derek's game. Romilda Vane was an adorable second-year with big, innocent eyes and fluffy hair held back with a red bow. She looked puppyish, while Derek looked feral, hunched over the gobstones field like a wolf growling over his kill. A lot of kids their age grew out of gobstones; getting sprayed in the face with gross liquids lost its appeal for whatever reason. Harry couldn't predict whether Romilda would continue playing gobstones after Derek broke her.

There was a bellow of pure rage, and Harry's head whipped around, making the world spin. It was Bridget, holding two halves of her best bottle-washer. The grief was plain on her face, and her little brother Graham was struggling to calm her down.

Harry raced over, his Hagrid-wine-induced misery forgotten. He skidsed to a stop, slipping on the grotesque slurry of liquids coating the floor, and knelt down beside Bridget.

"It shall be reforged," Harry promised, gently taking the pieces from her. Bridget didn't want to let them go, but she knew she had to. It would not roll. There was a possibility... But no, they had not trained for this.

Harry gave the pieces to Graham, who brushed aside his tears and accepted the shards of his sister's greatest weapon. Harry reached into a pocket, pulling out his gobstones case.

"Captain, no!" Bridget protested, watching in alarm as Harry snapped it open. He knew Bridget had another bottle-washer, they all carried seconds, but seeing her favorite one destroyed before her very eyes had shaken Bridget, badly. Harry closed his eyes, then pried his chalcedony bottle-washer from his case.

"Captain," Graham whispered as Harry handed the shimmering, pale blue sphere to Bridget. It looked like it had been carved from the sky itself. Bridget bowed her head, solemnly accepting the stone.

"I hereby vow to become a stoner worthy of such a glorious legacy," she declared, raising the stone above her head. Light streamed through it, illuminating her game against Neville with brutal, emptyreal clarity.

"This is the apotheosis of gobstones," Harry said, his voice ringing through the Great Hall. He clapped her shoulder. "This, Pritchard, is the beating heart torn from the enfeebled breast of your foe. Bite, Pritchard! Bite, and consume their failing strength to bolster your own!"

Bridget stared at him for a moment, then nodded firmly. Her head snapped to Neville, who reeled back. "Longbottom, do you have any last words?"

“What?” Neville asked nervously

Harry stood, breathing out slowly, then walked back to where Killian stood. He was frantically recording Tracey and Lee’s game on a long scroll, almost hitting himself in the face with his quill.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Killian said, his eyes not leaving the game.

Harry smiled, not wanting to say he pulled it out of his arse. Killian already knew.

It was not much longer for all three games to come to a close. Derek had a decisive victory over Romilda, Tracey had fought hard and eked out a win against Lee, who looked resigned to being accused of playing with sodalite, and Bridget got a rather painless victory over Neville, once her confidence had been restored. Neville did get penalty shots for Harry’s interference, but Harry had known Bridget would persevere.

Professor Sprout did the honor of bestowing the Gobstones Trophy. Harry pushed Derek forward to accept it. Derek struggled to hold it, but Vincent lifted him and carried Derek around on his shoulders to polite applause, and Tracey roaring in exultation.

It was a good end to the gobstones season.

Monty covered a yawn and leaned on the table, putting his elbow in a pile of eggs. Next to him, Luna giggled. This drew irritated looks from others at the Gryffindor table, who had woken that morning to find they had lost the lead in the House Cup. The Slytherin gobstones team had swept the last matches of the tournament. Harry had been telling people how important gobstones was for as long as Monty had known him. If anyone was surprised, it was their own fault for not listening.

As he shook the eggs from his sleeve, Monty caught sight of the first post owls arriving. A smile broke across his face when he spotted Aquila. She soared to him, a large package dangling from her claws. Monty hastily cleared a spot for her to land.

“What’s that?” Ron asked.

“It’s from Sirius,” Monty said, untying the package. Aquila nipped his hand affectionately, seized a sausage, then flew off again. Monty had brought his bag with him, anticipating the package, and slid it inside before Ron asked more questions.

Monty glanced at the Slytherin table. Harry must have seen Aquila. Even if he hadn’t, Monty had the Marauder’s Map, and he could get into the Slytherin common room if he had to. Harry had kept him up to date on the passwords, though Monty had never used them. It was still comforting to know he *could*.

Monty hauled himself up the ladder into the Divination classroom. The package had been weighing on his mind all day. He wanted to get it to Harry as soon as possible. They were running out of time until the Third Task

The room was stuffy, smoky, and boiling hot. Even after almost two years in her class, Monty still could not understand how Professor Trelawney endured it. Monty made his way to one of the windows, desperate for fresh air. Both of his morning classes, Herbology and Care, were on the grounds. It was a drastic shift, and the lack of air was making his head spin.

Monty sat heavily in one of the seats, trying to listen as Professor Trelawney said something about Mars. She dimmed all of the lights, leaving only the blazing fire that choked the room with perfumed smoke.

He did manage to focus enough to murmur, "*Tortaventum*," clearing the air around him. Monty shook his head, then looked at what Professor Trelawney had pulled from under her chair. It was a model of the solar system, encased in a crystal dome. It was beautiful, and Monty was captivated by it. He knew Harry liked models like that. Where had Professor Trelawney got it? Maybe Harry could make one of his own.

Monty yawned, his eyelids drooping. He had been staying up late to study, and the gobstones matches had gone longer than he had expected. Then the celebrations in the Great Hall, the long walk back to Gryffindor Tower as they accepted the fullness of their defeat, consoling Neville...

Monty was riding on Aquila's back, the wind blowing right through him. He felt weightless, like a feather falling through the air, spiraling down towards a house on a hill. It was an old mansion, choked by ivy, windows broken out, the grounds overgrown and unkempt. Monty drifted through a window, carried along by some unseen current, sliding along a floor, carving sinuous paths in the dust, the susurrus of scales against wood...

Someone was crying. He could taste blood in the air. Someone was screaming. He could feel it reverberating through the floor. The floor creaked beneath him as he slid along it, towards the screaming.

"*Nagini...*"

He swayed back and forth, lifting off the floor. He felt like he was being burned alive, burned from his very center. The words, so strange to him.

"*...there is still Monty Potter...*"

The stick. The words were wrong, and he struggled to understand the high-pitched, jagged tones. Dust fell through the air. Something thrashed on the floor, screaming, screaming, screaming. Laughing as he burned.

“Monty!”

Monty’s eyes snapped open, but he immediately squeezed them shut again. He felt like his head had been branded. It hurt. It hurt worse than anything Monty had ever felt, and his vision was blurry with tears. He had fallen to the floor. Neville and Ron were kneeling beside him. Everyone was around him, staring at him.

“Yeah?” Monty said, sitting up as if nothing had happened. His scar had hurt again. He had another dream. It was hard to think through the pain, but he remembered what Harry had told him. No one, absolutely *no one*, could know.

“Are you alright?” Neville asked.

“Yeah,” Monty said, his heart hammering in his chest. He had to stay calm. “Why do you ask?”

“Mate,” Ron said in a low voice, looking around, “you just fell out of your chair.”

“I fell asleep,” Monty said, covering a yawn. “And then fell out of my chair.”

“What did you See?” Professor Trelawney asked, pushing her way through the students. “You were clutching your scar! Rolling on the floor and clutching your scar!”

“I saw the floor,” Monty said blandly, rubbing his head. His scar still felt like it was on fire. “Sorry, Professor, I didn’t get much sleep last night. Been practicing for the tournament.” Monty yawned, then got back into his seat. “I’ve had a headache all day. Right, Nev?”

“Right,” Neville stuttered, looking scared and lost. Monty tried smiling at him, and hoped it looked right.

“Must’ve hit my head on the way down,” Monty said, feeling genuinely embarrassed. Everyone was watching him. “I really am sorry, professor. I didn’t mean to fall asleep in class.”

“Are you sure you didn’t See anything?” Professor Trelawney pressed, a feverish look in her eyes.

Monty yawned again, shaking his head. “Nothing at all.”

Maybes Don't Fly in June

Chapter Summary

June 1995

Harry pressed his palms into his eyes, groaning in discomfort. He felt wrung out. He had no idea how he got through classes, and couldn't remember what had even been discussed. His entire body ached, and it was a struggle to keep down food. Even the *smell* of food made him nauseous. That he was still feeling the effects of his night with Hagrid was concerning, and he had been fighting with himself whether to go to his dad or Madam Pomfrey for help.

He rolled onto his side, curling up. He knew Monty had got the thing from Sirius. There was some rumor about Monty fainting or falling asleep in his Divination class. Harry grabbed his hair, frustrated with himself. Jasmine had kindly taken his prefect rounds that evening. He wanted to know what happened, but he was hiding in bed, sick as a dog.

Harry shuddered, his skin prickling. With some effort, Harry rolled himself over again and looked between his fingers. He reached out and pushed his curtains aside. A fourteen-year-old boy-sized invisible shape passed through and climbed onto his bed. Harry pulled his wand from under his pillow, closing his eyes so he could focus. Silence. Privacy. Security. He had no idea what time it was, only that it was late.

Monty pulled off his invisibility cloak and gave Harry a worried look. "Are you alright?"

Harry pushed himself to a seated position, shaking his head. "I'll be fine. Just been sick. You?"

"You said to tell you if I had another dream."

Harry was immediately alert. "What happened?"

Monty explained how he had fallen asleep during Divination, how he had a dream where he was flying, then he was in a house, and someone was screaming. There were two names spoken. Nagini. Monty Potter. His scar had been burning.

Harry released a breath, trying to get his muddled mind to work.

"Alright," he said. "Mind if I have a look?"

Monty frowned. "What do you mean?"

Harry rubbed his face, wincing as his brain gave another vicious little pang. "I want to use legilimency to see your memory of what happened," he explained. "If you're okay with that."

Monty bit his lip, watching Harry carefully. After a moment he asked, "Only that, right?"

Harry nodded, which made his gorge rise. "Just that, I promise."

Monty let out a breath, steeling himself. "Okay. Okay, I'm ready."

Harry swallowed, wondering if this was a stupid idea, then raised his wand. He met his brother's eyes. "*Legilimens*."

Harry nearly bit his tongue off trying to not be sick at the feeling. Monty had considerably been thinking of his dream. Unfortunately, the memory of his scar pain was overwhelming. It was blinding, excruciating, and felt like it would never end. Harry's heart ached for the agony his brother had gone through, the embarrassment of collapsing in class, the lingering pain that had been with him for the rest of the day. Even now, Monty was fighting a headache. And he had sought Harry out. Monty trusted him, far more than Harry deserved.

It was an interesting dream, flying on an owl's back. Abruptly, the perspective shifted. He was low to the ground, sliding along a dusty, decaying floor. All of his senses were acting differently. He heard through vibrations. He smelled when his tongue flicked out. Then he was in a room, an indistinct figure screaming and writhing on the floor. There were high-pitched words that were impossible to decipher, then suddenly a menacing, sibilant sound which Harry still couldn't understand. He could not understand, as he was not a parselmouth.

Harry gently pulled away from his brother's mind, breathing heavily. Sweat had broken out across his body. Monty was holding his forehead, his face twisted with pain. Harry covered his mouth, once again fighting the urge to vomit. He should have been able to understand the parselmouth...but he hadn't properly heard it for Frankie to translate. It was in a memory.

"Sorry," he said, swaying slightly. A snake. Monty had been a snake. Nagini, presumably. There was only one other parselmouth Harry was aware of. The Dark Lord. And someone was working with him. Had there been two voices in that room? It was hard to tell with the senses of a snake. The screaming, the parseltongue. All Harry knew was that the Dark Lord had been in that room. Unless there was another parselmouth running around who could make his brother's scar hurt.

"It's alright," Monty said, rubbing his scar. "Is that all?"

"Yeah," Harry said, frowning. He knew he was starting to freak out again. He had to keep it together for Monty's sake. He didn't want to know Monty how fucking terrifying what was happening to him was, not until he had an actual answer as to *what* was happening. He knew Monty had a connection to the Dark Lord, a connection of an unknown nature, presumably related to him surviving the Killing Curse. If Monty was connected to the Dark Lord, the Dark Lord was connected to *him*.

Was the Dark Lord having Monty dreams?

The thought horrified Harry so profoundly that for a moment he couldn't speak.

“I’ve got this,” Monty said, removing a package from under his invisibility cloak. Harry shuddered, then clenched his fists. He needed to keep it together.

“Thanks,” he said evenly, taking the package. “I hope he wasn’t too upset about parting with it.”

“I did have to tell him it was for you,” Monty admitted. “But he says since you’ve been helping me out that it’s fine.”

Harry sighed. He didn’t want Sirius Black knowing he had been helping Monty with the tournament. If Black knew, then Remus knew, then Dumbledore knew. But keeping Monty alive was more important than that.

He opened the package, glad for some distraction, for something else to focus on. Inside was a map scrawled on a decent piece of parchment, and a sheaf of notes from when Black had been recreating the Marauder’s Map.

“He says he’s been working on it every once in a while,” Monty said.

“No, it’s perfect,” Harry said, spreading it out. He only needed the bit with the quidditch pitch on it. The Marauder’s Map was strange. It didn’t show every living creature, only that which its creators had deemed significant. House-elves were a notable exclusion. Harry doubted any of the creatures in the maze would show up, unless Hagrid had grown particularly attached to them.

“And I’ve got this too,” Monty said, pulling out a twig.

Harry blinked at it.

“Neville says it’s yew,” Monty explained.

Harry blinked again, his body going cold with dread. “The hedge is made of yew?”

Monty nodded. “Neville says it’s poisonous.”

Harry carefully took the twig from his brother. Yew. It was a wandwood. The same wood as the Dark Lord’s wand.

“What a sick joke,” he muttered, drawing a concerned look from Monty. Harry sighed. “It doesn’t matter, just don’t eat any of it.”

Monty snorted. “Wasn’t planning on it.

Monty said something else, and Harry knew he responded, but his mind was a mess. He didn’t know whether he should tell his dad about this new dream, about the scar pain. About how fucking obvious it was the Dark Lord was behind everything, and that the Dark Lord wanted his brother. And the headmaster, and his dad, were happy to let the Dark Lord’s plans unfold. To wait and see what happened to *his brother*.

His brother left. Harry wished he could have offered something. Promises, certainty, comfort, some potion for his headache. Something. Anything.

Harry stared at the deadly little twig in his hand. It could have been a coincidence, but deep down Harry knew it wasn't. It was a calling card. The Dark Lord was insane.

He could have laughed. He really could.

Severus had acquired a wide variety of shellfish. Crustaceans and molluscs, both magical and non-magical. These creatures had something in common, a protein, that made his son ill. He was no longer straying into alchemy, but diving headfirst into it. Charity's *computer* had been an extremely slow means of acquiring information, but ultimately yielded results. The question now was how he could magically isolate the common *protein* these creatures had. There were likely muggle means, but Severus was not going to spend a decade studying muggle sciences. His son could be dead a hundred times over in that time frame.

The door to his skrewt laboratory opened, and he froze in disbelief as his son strolled in. Harry was wearing only shorts and a shirt. The boy hadn't even put shoes on. The barrier across the door bulged out then contracted around Harry, encasing the boy in a protective layer. Severus closed his eyes in relief.

"What are you doing in here?" he demanded.

"Sorry," Harry said absently, dragging a hand through his hair. It was sticking up all over the place. "Been sick."

Severus sneered.

"Had to drink Hagrid under the table to get him to tell me about the maze," Harry continued, not looking at him. "Won't happen again."

Severus narrowed his eyes. He had no idea how to respond to his sixteen-year-old son drinking a sixty-year-old half-giant gamekeeper *under the table*. There was no precedent for this.

"I already feel like shite," Harry said, glancing at him. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked drawn, as if he were recovering from a long illness. It sparked a frisson of concern in Severus. He disliked seeing his son ill. He disliked his son drinking to excess.

"Very well," Severus said. "Need I repeat myself?"

Harry stopped moving, then turned to fully look at him. "The hedge is made of yew."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

Harry blinked, then shook his head. "I thought you might...never mind. Monty had another dream."

The weeks leading up to the Third Task hurtled by in a dizzying blur. Harry went to class. He studied. He laughed with his friends. Lady Madeleine delivered the list of maze creatures to his brother. He told Monty not to worry about it. He had a plan. He told Monty to study for his exams, research the creatures, practice counterspells with his friends. Everything was going to be fine. Harry would make sure of it.

His dad never followed up about the second dream, about the recurring scar pain. Monty didn't have another dream. His scar didn't hurt again. Harry clung to those facts, hopefully, foolishly.

There was nothing else he could do.

It was early evening before the last day of exams. Before the Third Task. Harry was taking his walk around the Black Lake, watching the fading light as it played across the water. There was a letter in his hand, a letter from Percival Septimus Weasley. Percy was staying in Hogsmeade. He was there to help proctor the Third Task.

He looked at the castle, where it rose above the grounds. Inside, students were in a frenzy, studying desperately for their last exams of the year. Harry didn't need to study. He barely needed to pay attention. His head was crammed with so many facts and words, he just needed to transfer them to parchment in some coherent manner.

Harry walked away from the lake, slipping into the trees. For the first time in months, he turned into a squirrel.

He ran through the underbrush, scaled trees, fast, free, small, his thoughts condensing to one goal, one thought, one desire.

The bars on the gates were generously spaced. A squirrel could leap easily through them. Harry did, racing away from Hogwarts, away from the bone-deep terror he had been fighting against all year, away from his exhaustion, from needy friends and endless, tedious exams.

He kept to the trees and bushes, a squirrel on a mission. Small, silent, unobtrusive. No one would look twice at a squirrel.

Hogsmeade was idyllic on a summer evening. The Three Broomsticks hummed with light and life. His furred ears twitched at the boom of Hagrid's laughter. Hagrid, who hadn't

thought twice of another night getting blackout drunk. Hagrid, who couldn't even remember he had been drinking with a student.

Harry's nose twitched. His senses were heightened. He could hear so much, so brightly, so loudly. It made him nervous, a small squirrel around so many big humans. But inside, Harry was also a human. He fought against his new instincts and won. Percy was staying at the Three Broomsticks. He had a room.

He scaled the side of the building, his little claws finding purchase, pausing to sniff the air. It was a faint scent, but Harry would recognize it anywhere.

The window was open. He stuck his head over the ledge, squinting. He had excellent vision. He could see his destination sitting at a desk, diligently working, the scratch of his quill amplified in Harry's squirrel ears. Harry crawled into the room and resumed his human form.

He cast a silencing charm, biting his lip to suppress a smile. He leaned against the window, quietly watching Percy for a moment, fully aware he was being weird.

"Percy."

Percy flinched so badly he knocked over his ink. He angrily spun around, going bright red when he saw Harry.

"What are you doing here?" Percy hissed.

Harry grimaced. Percy looked genuinely upset. "I wanted to see you."

Percy pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm busy, Evans, and you should be at Hogwarts."

"I'm sorry," Harry said, straightening. Surprising Percy had been a bad idea. "I'll... I'll go. Sorry." He glanced out of the window. He could climb down as a human, probably. Or jump and slow his descent. Or apparate to the street.

Percy sighed wearily, taking out his wand to clean the spilled ink. Harry hoped whatever he had been working on wasn't ruined. "You really should." He shook his head, then pushed up his glasses. "What was so urgent that you needed to break into my room?"

Harry felt a flush of guilt at this description. He really was being a creep. "Like I said, I wanted to see you. Well, I wanted to take you somewhere."

Percy gave him a flat look. "I beg your pardon?"

Harry crossed his arms, his feelings of guilt and idiocy increasing. "There's a film I wanted to see. It's the opening night. I was going to see it over holiday, but, well..." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I've...not been doing well lately."

"What do you mean?" Percy asked.

Harry shook his head. "Nothing. It's stupid. I'm sorry for bothering you." He turned towards the window, running through the different ways he could leave as quickly as possible.

"Harry," Percy said firmly. Harry stiffened, then turned to look at him. Percy had stood. Harry wanted to throw himself at Percy. He wanted to feel better, and he felt disgusted with himself that he was using Percy for that.

"Is it something you wish to discuss?"

Harry shook his head, avoiding Percy's gaze. "I just wanted a break. From everything."

Percy sighed, and Harry heard steps approaching him. He looked up, and was surprised when Percy drew him into a hug. Percy so rarely initiated contact. It made Harry feel even worse. It had been a stupid, selfish idea. Percy was busy. He had work to do. Harry had no idea how many rules he was breaking. He wasn't Head Boy material. He didn't even know the bloody rules.

Harry pressed his face against Percy's chest, relishing the feeling of being held. It made him feel strange, and slightly uncomfortable. He had such a hard time relaxing. He tipped his head up, watching the conflict of emotions across Percy's face. Harry enjoyed seeing Percy's determination, his confidence. He was frighteningly competent.

"I should escort you back to Hogwarts," Percy said, frowning at him. "Students are forbidden to go to Hogsmeade outside of designated weekends. And you have an exam tomorrow morning."

Harry felt himself blush. Of course Percy knew the exam schedule. He would have made a point of it.

"You *should*?" Harry said, a slight grin creeping onto his face.

"Yes," Percy said simply.

"But?" Harry prompted, his smile growing. He could hardly believe what was happening. Was Percy going to bend the rules for him?

Percy made a strange face, sighed, then bent down to kiss Harry. Harry swooned, his hands fisting in Percy's neat and tidy robes. He felt such immense, immediate relief. It was overwhelming.

Percy sighed again, then dropped his head to Harry's shoulder. "What is this *film* you wish to see?"

Percy had lost his mind.

It explained the situation perfectly. Harry had appeared in his room at the Three Broomsticks, having somehow got through the school gates. Harry had been unlike himself. Upset. Vulnerable. Concern for Harry had cut through Percy's irritation, and all of his focus had been bent towards alleviating whatever troubled Harry. Harry needed him. Percy could not recall Harry ever *needing* someone, and this humbled him so deeply he could not deny Harry what he wanted.

He was a Ministry employee. Harry was an underage Hogwarts student. Harry not only had his Arithmancy exam in the morning, and would participate in the Third Task the next evening. A task during which Percy would join Mr. Crouch, Mr. Bagman, and his former professors in proctoring. He knew, from Harry's sometimes terse letters, from reading between the lines, from the unflattering articles, from his mother's dismissal and the public's view of Monty Potter being the Hogwarts champion, and Harry being some orphaned Slytherin muggleborn, an aberration, that Harry had been under significant pressure. Pressure which he had done a remarkable job of hiding. Harry sometimes made things seem so effortless that Percy had ignorantly assumed it *was* effortless, that Harry's brilliance meant everything came easily to him. He had not fully appreciated the stress Harry had been placed under.

It was a simple request. A few hours outside of Hogwarts, a few hours spent with Percy in some enjoyable pursuit. And Percy, in his madness, had agreed to it.

He was insane. It was the *only* explanation. He had lost his mind for Harry Evans, and he would gladly lose it again. There was no other circumstance under which he would have agreed to apparate to London, to Harry purchasing tickets to a film, to him sitting in a dark theater, his head craned back to watch an intimidatingly large screen on which a woman was taking a dust shower.

Harry had not let go of his hand since they apparated from Hogsmeade. Harry was pressed against him, practically crawling into Percy's lap, laughing quietly as the woman, now coated in dust, inserted herself between a perverse man and the mousy woman he was menacing. Percy was shocked when the dust woman called her *my girlfriend*, then proceeded to kiss the woman.

Percy's jaw dropped. Other than Harry, and the brief glimpse of his friend Urquhart dancing with Spinnet at the Yule Ball, Percy had *never* seen anyone that was like him. He had never seen a woman kiss another woman, or a man kiss another man. He knew of Uncle Bilius, in a distant way that was never directly addressed, and Uncle Bilius' *close friend*, but he had never witnessed anything that spoke of intimacy. And this dust woman had so casually, so easily, kissed another woman. He was stunned.

"I'll lend you the comics some time," Harry whispered, squeezing his hand. "I read them when I was in hospital."

Percy swallowed. He was holding another boy's hand. It was dark, and no one was looking at them, but they were nevertheless in public. Maybe, one day...

He took a shuddering breath, then looked at the screen again to watch the rest of the film unfold, never letting go of Harry's hand.

Percy apparated them to an alley in Hogsmeade and was immediately pushed against a wall. He gasped as Harry pressed against him, one hand tangled in Percy's hair, the other drifting lower and lower down his back.

He released an embarrassing noise, losing all strength in his limbs as Harry pushed his tongue into his mouth, making desperate, needy little sounds that made Percy's body respond in a wholly inappropriate way.

Harry squeezed him, pushing harder against him. Percy lost all control of the situation, his entire world consumed by Harry, by how badly, how *obviously* Harry wanted him. Everything was soft and firm and warm and glorious and perfect, and Percy never wanted the feeling to end.

But Harry sighed, pressing his head against Percy's chest, groaning in mingled desire and annoyance.

"We should stop," Harry said, his voice low, sending shivers down Percy's spine.

"I... I don't want to," Percy whispered, his face burning with the admission.

Harry shook his head, slowly withdrawing from Percy. He rocked upward, and Percy nearly fainted from the feeling, but Harry only gave him a chaste kiss.

"I'm a terrible influence on you," Harry said, grinning lasciviously. He ran a hand down the front of Percy's robes, and Percy gritted his teeth. "I'll see you tomorrow, Mr. Weasley."

Then Harry was gone, leaving Percy aching, confused, desperate, unsatisfied. He stayed in the dark alley, catching his breath, waiting for his body to obey him again. After some time, Percy straightened his robes, cleaned off his glasses, and walked back to the Three Broomsticks.

Henry Samuel Evans was going to be the death of him.

Shaky Ground

Chapter Summary

June 24th, 1995

The Third Task

The Great Hall was cacophonous the morning of the Third Task. Monty ineffectually massaged his temples; Professor McGonagall had made him take his History of Magic exam in her office the evening before, rather than with everyone else that morning. His head was still filled with the names of goblin rebels and dates of battles, and he had cramped his hand writing so quickly. History of Magic wasn't his best class, but Monty had still wanted to do well on the exam. He was looking forward to dropping it after O.W.L.s.

The excitement for the Third Task was palpable, but Monty only felt resigned. It had been weeks of late nights, sneaking into classrooms to practice spell after spell, Hermione unearthing so many useful spells, trying to memorize as much as he could on top of studying for exams. Monty had gone along with it in part to placate his friends, in part to feel better prepared. Harry had told him that, if their plan went off without a hitch, Monty wouldn't have to use his wand at all. It was wishful thinking, and Monty felt bad for relying on Harry so much, but it made him feel better about the whole thing.

All he had to do was not win.

Aquila had dropped off a card from Sirius, wishing him luck. Monty surreptitiously glanced at the Slytherin table. He had noticed Harry had been looking on death's door for the entire month. Monty was worried it was because of him. But that morning, Harry had a slight smile, was laughing at something his friend Pucey said. He was wearing muggle clothes, which made him stand out in the sea of black robes. His cat was eating from a plate on the table, and Harry was stroking her back. He looked like he was going to be okay.

"Professor McGonagall's coming," Luna whispered to him.

Monty looked up to see Professor McGonagall walking towards him. She told him he was to go to the chamber off of the Great Hall, where the champions' families would be meeting. He parted ways with his friends, trailing after Delacour, who had joined the Ravenclaws that morning, and Krum, who slouched out of some corner to cross the hall. Monty rubbed his arm, not entirely sure what to expect. Hopefully not the Dursleys, though he doubted they would agree had they been asked. He glanced at the Slytherin table again, and saw Harry stand. However, instead of walking towards the antechamber, he left the Great Hall with two of his friends.

Monty felt his heart sink. Harry didn't have a family. Feeling conflicted, he entered the antechamber.

On one side of the room, Delacour was with her mother and little sister. Monty spotted Krum with his parents in a corner. He looked around, and to his surprise Monty saw Mrs. Weasley and Bill standing near the fire. A short distance away, there was Sirius.

"Surprise!" Mrs. Weasley said.

Monty smiled, still not sure what was going on, and walked towards them. He glanced at Sirius, who beamed at him, rolled his eyes, then shot a look at Mrs. Weasley. Confused, Monty walked to her first. She hugged him and kissed his cheek, then he shook Bill's hand.

"What's up, kid?" Sirius said easily, strolling over to them. Monty smiled, and turned to hug his godfather. He smelled like cigarette smoke, which was oddly comforting.

"No hard feelings about last summer?" Sirius asked, looking over at Mrs. Weasley and Bill.

Mrs. Weasley's smile faltered. "I, well, Arthur and I discussed it afterwards. I would have acted the same way in your position."

"It was a night of bad decisions," Bill offered, reaching out to shake Sirius' hand.

"Well, there was one person who kept his head on straight," Sirius said, leaving an arm around Monty's shoulders and looking around the room. "Where is the brat?"

"Brat?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

Sirius gave her a strange look. "Harry Evans."

An unusual expression crossed Mrs. Weasley's face, and Bill had become extremely interested in a tapestry depicting a cavorting herd of granian, winged horses with coats of shimmering grey.

"He hasn't got a family," Monty said.

Mrs. Weasley had started to turn pink. "Surely they contacted *someone*."

Monty shrugged. He had no idea. He knew Harry's friend Urquhart's parents and her little sister had been there for the Second Task, but the Second Task had gone very poorly. It wasn't family-friendly. Had anyone asked Harry what he wanted? Had anyone cared?

Sirius gently shook Monty, leaning down to mutter, "Don't worry about it. Maybe we'll see him later." Sirius straightened, giving Mrs. Weasley and Bill a roguish smile. "Who's ready for a tour?"

As soon as Harry stepped out of his Arithmancy exam, Lady Madeleine attacked him. She latched onto his trousers, thrashed around, then ran off.

“What’s got into her?” Phoebe asked, snatching Felipe out of the air. Professor Vector had forbidden all pets in the exam room.

“She’s a cat?” Terence suggested as they walked down the corridor, headed to the Great Hall for lunch.

“I can’t believe they let Potter have those Weasleys with him,” Phoebe said with surprising bitterness.

“Who else has he got?” Harry asked.

“But what about you?” Phoebe asked. “You could borrow my parents if you want!”

Harry shook his head. “It’s fine. Professor Snape asked if there was anyone I wanted them to contact, and I told him no. Not after what happened at the Second Task. I have a feeling this one’s going to be worse.”

“Don’t...don’t say that, mate,” Terence said, his voice tight. “You have no idea what it was like watching...”

Harry wanted to point out they had no idea what it was like going through it, but didn’t want to start an argument. He knew it had been a bad time for his friends, first watching all his fights during the Second Task, then him being in the infirmary for a month. No one had talked to him about it, but he knew there was tension between those who had conspired to put his name in and those who hadn’t. Astrid felt bad enough without him making it worse. And he knew Mr. and Mrs. Urquhart would have shown up, they were nice people, but he didn’t know them that well. He had only met them a few times.

As they walked into the hall, Phoebe suddenly seized Harry’s arm and began shaking him. “Egg drama! Egg drama!”

“What?” Harry said, looking at the Gryffindor table. It took Harry a moment to recall Mafalda and her huge chocolate Easter egg, which was very similar to chocolate eggs delivered to the Gryffindor table. Apparently Hermione had got a small egg. Harry hadn’t paid much attention to this minor gossip, but Phoebe loved her egg drama.

He spotted Mrs. Weasley and Percy’s oldest brother Bill sitting at the Gryffindor table, increasing the number of red-headed people by fifty percent. Hermione was sitting across from Mrs. Weasley, and little Luna had crammed herself in between Mrs. Weasley and Monty. Sirius Black was there too, and he grinned when he saw Harry looking. Harry didn’t react, opting to drag Phoebe to the Slytherin table so they could have lunch.

Harry had shaken off his friends, telling them he needed to clear his head before the Third Task. He also needed to take his daily walk around the Black Lake. Apparently the Giant Squid wanted to make amends, as she was drifting through the shallows, occasionally giving him offerings from the lake. Mostly fish, but she did find a very pretty rock with flecks of copper that reminded Harry of Percy. He put it in a pocket for safekeeping.

When he reached the far side of the lake, Harry sat down and drew his knees up. Spending a few short hours with Percy had been just what he needed. He could simply be himself, be with the boy he had secretly fancied for ages, pretend the rest of the world didn't exist. Harry laid his head on his knees and sighed. He wanted to see Percy again, a private moment before the Third Task, but Harry knew he was pushing his luck to the breaking point. It had been incredibly kind of Percy to indulge him so much. Harry had no idea what Percy was getting out of the deal.

Harry was slammed out of his depressing thoughts by a very large, slightly mangy, black dog.

"What the fuck," Harry said, trying to fend off the dog, who was a full grown man named Sirius Black. "Get off me, you twat!"

The dog pranced away, and thankfully turned into Black, who bent over laughing, pointing at Harry's expression.

"Fuck you," Harry said, brushing himself off, making sure there weren't any tears in his shirt. It was his favorite shirt, the seahorse one Percy had got him. He was wearing it for good luck. "Next time you do that, I'll bloody neuter you. Why aren't you playing fetch with Potter?"

"Needed a break," Black said, dropping down to sit next to Harry. He pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his leather jacket, tapping one out and taking it between his teeth. He then held the pack out to Harry. "Want one?"

Harry gave it a skeptical look, but he was curious so he accepted one. "Should you really be corrupting underage wizards?"

Black snorted, lighting his own cigarette. "Believe me, I got up to *much* worse than this." He passed the lighter to Harry. Harry frowned at it.

"It's weird how simple muggle contraptions like this are sometimes functional around magic, sometimes not," he observed, putting the cigarette between his lips. Harry had seen people smoke often enough to have a basic idea of how it was done. You lit it, you inhaled. Simple as.

Sirius was doing a poor job of pretending not to look at him. Wary, Harry lit the cigarette and took the smallest possible drag. The heady taste of tobacco was thick, and it burned in his lungs, making him slightly dizzy. He exhaled, then took a fresh breath of air, coughing a few times.

"First Hagrid, now you," Harry said, taking another drag. He liked it better the second time. It hurt less, and it made him feel relaxed almost instantly. Harry had always secretly thought

smoking was cool, but it would be a cold day in hell before he told that to Sirius Black.

“What’s this about Hagrid?” Black asked, his eyes alight with mischief.

Harry took another drag, distantly realizing that smoking was something he could easily get into. His gran had died from lung cancer. Harry wouldn’t have to worry about that, but the thought left him feeling bereft. The smell reminded Harry strongly of her. It was comforting. It was something they could share, even with her gone. He missed her.

He sighed, and took another drag.

“I went to his hut for a drink,” Harry said, watching the smoke drift away from him, little wispy tendrils curling over the dark waters of the lake, dispersing in the gentle breeze. “He gave me dandelion wine. Said it wasn’t much stronger than butterbeer.”

Black started choking. “He *what*? You had that piss water Hagrid brews? Merlin’s beard, I nearly drank myself *blind* on that shit! *Not much stronger than butterbeer* my hairy fucking arse.”

Harry shook his head and continued to smoke. He held his hand up, examining the cigarette. Drinking, smoking, feeling cute boys up in alleyways. He was turning into a delinquent.

“There *is* something I wanted to talk to you about,” Black said. He had already finished his cigarette and was taking out another. “You’ve been helping Monty this entire time.”

Harry said nothing, putting the cigarette in his mouth for an excuse. It was becoming easier and easier to smoke it. It made him feel serene. He knew it was just the nicotine. He knew it was addictive. He knew it killed people’s grandmothers. In the moment, he didn’t care.

“Why?” Black asked. “I’ve talked to Remus about it, and we can’t work it out. What’s in it for you?”

“Nothing,” Harry said, breathing out more smoke. He felt like a dragon. “There’s nothing in it for me, and frankly it could land me in a load of shit if you and Professor Lupin get it in your head to spread this little conspiracy of yours around.”

“That doesn’t tell me *why*,” Black pointed out, giving Harry a searching look. “I know I owe you a lot. You saved me. But Monty is my responsibility now. You have to know what it looks like from the outside.”

Harry shook his head. “Why is it so hard for people to believe that sometimes you just want to do the right thing?”

“You enchanted that boat for him,” Sirius said. “Monty asked me to cover for it if anyone asked, but never said who put runes all over that thing. And there was no reason for you to not turn me in right away—”

“I told you my reasons back then,” Harry said. “It was in the interest of justice. The Ministry is fucked. You’re not the only one who didn’t get a trial, which is another thing I’m sure I said at the time.” Harry turned to face Black. “You know, I came out here so I could get some

peace and quiet before the Third Task. Since you seem so well-informed, I reckon Potter's told you what the plan is, so leave off."

Black smirked at him. "He hasn't. All I know is that you wanted that map."

Harry took a final drag from the cigarette then stubbed it out on the rocks. Maybe Black would bum him another one after he won.

Monty glanced down at the mirror hanging from his neck. This was the part he was most nervous about. He knew that, initially, there had been no way for anyone to see the Second Task. Harry had told him as much, and had given Percy the idea. But it was also a liability. Part of the plan relied on no one knowing what Monty was up to.

They had all been led to different sides of the maze. He and Harry had hoped they would get the same starting point, but Professor McGonagall had taken Monty away from the other champions, while Professor Snape took Harry, and Professor Flitwick and Remus led Krum and Delacour to their starting points. Percy was there, looking very stern and pale under the cold lights of the quidditch stadium, as well as his boss Mr. Crouch, and Hagrid. Monty had already lost sight of them. It was just him and Professor McGonagall. As far as she knew.

Mr. Crouch had told them all to send red sparks if they reached a point where they could not continue. Monty was tempted to shoot up red sparks straight away, but Harry, and Sirius, *and* Remus had warned him about the magical contract with the Goblet of Fire. It was in effect until someone won the Triwizard Tournament. He was bound to compete.

The hedge was twenty feet high as promised, every inch of it made of deadly yew. It had taken Monty some reflection to understand the significance of that. It was what Voldemort's wand was made of. He didn't think many people knew that.

Ludo Bagman blew his whistle. Monty was in first place, and the first to go in.

"Good luck, Potter," Professor McGonagall said stiffly.

"Thanks, professor," Monty said, running into the maze. He pulled out his wand as he ran, and took the first turn he saw. He stopped immediately. He had to get rid of the mirror.

"Sorry, Percy," he whispered, taking the pendant from his neck. He threw it as hard as he could over the hedge. As the mirror passed over, the air rippled oddly. Monty frowned at it, coming to the conclusion that it was a spell to keep them inside, and to keep the audience from looking in. Once the mirror was gone, Monty put on his invisibility cloak, took Hester out of his pocket, and pulled out the Marauder's Map.

Step one complete.

The whistle blew again.

It was time for step two. He had to find Harry.

People in the audience were shouting complaints. Percy stopped his patrol around the maze, curious about the source of their dismay. It took him a moment to parse their words, then he spun around to look at the mirrors hovering above the maze. He scowled when one only showed an image of the night sky, then felt a powerful sense of dread. Monty had been the first in the maze. That had been *his* mirror. There were no sparks, though. No screaming, or shouts, or any indication that Monty had run into trouble. What was happening?

“If you die, I’ll kill you.”

Harry rolled his eyes, and gave his dad a reassuring smile. “Thanks.”

His dad didn’t smile back. He had no expression whatsoever. Harry could tell his dad was worried. He was worried too.

“I’m not going to die,” Harry promised, turning to face his entrance to the maze. He pulled out his shirt, looking at the map he had stuck to the inside of it. He was glad he hadn’t been placed on the opposite side from Monty, or the shortest path to get to him would have been straight through the middle.

The whistle blew a second time.

“I’ll end this quickly,” Harry said, running into the maze. He knew the incantation for Fiendfyre. He had never cast it before, but he was more than willing to if it kept Monty safe. There was the possible side effect of Monty getting burned alive, which gave Harry pause. It was a dangerous, extremely difficult to control spell at the best of times. He shook his head and took a turn. He knew it was smarter to navigate the maze slowly, but since he was going for Monty before the cup, he had twice the distance to cover.

Harry ran for a minute, and then his throat began to tingle. He stopped immediately, conjuring a bubble over his head. He held his wand out, taking a few cautious steps forward and peeking around a corner.

Sitting with its back end facing him was the largest tortoise Harry had ever seen. It was as big as a car, and looked ancient. Its shell was encrusted with jewels, and it had six curved legs with wickedly jagged claws at the end, as well as a massive pair of pincer claws which the creature was using to tear apart a wyvern. It had already decapitated the wyvern and was currently ripping off its wings, like a child curiously taking apart a dead butterfly.

“You’ve got to be fucking joking me,” Harry muttered angrily to himself. “Hagrid didn’t say anything about a bloody *fire crab*.”

Harry gave the creature a calculating look. The shells were valuable, but fire crabs were also endangered. It was one reason why Hagrid should have got in much more trouble than he had, as after mating with the fire crab the manticore had eaten it. It had probably been a delicacy to the thing.

He had a magical video camera attached to his chest. Killing a fire crab would be a bad look, but he also couldn’t have the thing running around. It seemed very, *very* pointed that a fire crab had been dropped in his section of the maze. And it also seemed a wyvern had been there instead. Harry had expected the wyvern.

Harry pointed at the ground beneath the fire crab, tracing a circle in the air. “*Interravi*.” The ground cracked, then broke completely apart, collapsing into itself and taking the fire crab with it. It released the wyvern and flailed its pincers uselessly, making a keening sound that grated on Harry’s ears. Harry piled more dirt on top of it, burying the fire crab for someone to dig up later.

He left the bubble around his head, ignored the tight feeling in his throat, and walked by the wyvern’s corpse. It was similar to a dragon, but smaller and more slender. Parts of it had inflated in self-defense. Harry stepped over its severed head. He hoped the fire crab was a one-off, but it was clear someone was out to kill him. Harry gripped his wand, hoping there weren’t any other special additions, and hoping the creatures were smart enough to stay the fuck out of his way.

Monty checked his map again. So far, he hadn’t run into any obstacles. It corroborated the idea that whoever put his name in intended for him to win.

“*Bored*,” Hester complained, waddling along on her legs. At his request, she had grown to her full three feet. She wouldn’t fully mature for another century, which was fine for an occamy, but rather inconvenient for a teenage wizard who wanted a rampaging occamy to protect him.

“*Me too*,” he hissed back. He could see Harry’s dot, but he had barely moved from his entrance to the maze. Had he already run into something?

The silent, empty maze was making Monty nervous. It was eerie, and even with his cloak on he had the impression he was being watched.

He turned a corner and found Harry’s dead body. He looked...he looked like he had been partially eaten. He looked like he had been tortured. There was an expression of pure, helpless anguish on his bloodied face. His limbs were bent and twisted. His wand had been snapped in half.

Monty's mind went blank, his eyes welling with tears. Harry was nowhere near him. It was impossible.

He ground his teeth together, pointing his wand. "*Riddikulus!*"

Harry's body burst into wisps of smoke, and the boggart fled. Monty sighed, brushing unshed tears away and wiping his glasses off. This was exactly why he had to get rid of the mirror. There was no way he could explain why his greatest fear was Harry getting killed. He couldn't even explain it to himself.

Harry stared in disbelief at the erumpent charging at him. It looked like a rhino that had quintupled in size before being dipped into radioactive material. Its head was mostly a giant horn that glowed with barely suppressed explosive fluid.

"*Protego maxima!*"

The erumpent crashed into the shield and exploded. The force of it blew the hedges apart. The ground bucked under Harry, throwing him from his feet. His shield fractured, then shattered in a blinding flash of light, leaving nothing between Harry and the erumpent.

"I'll turn you into a fucking crumple-horned snorkack," Harry growled, brandishing his wand at the erumpent. Attacking head on would just make its horn explode.

The erumpent lowered its head, pawing at the ground, readying another charge. Harry could tell it was a female from its sheer size. He hoped she wasn't pregnant, or he was fucked. Yet another creature he couldn't kill; they bred slowly, only having one calf at a time.

Harry looked into the erumpent's eyes. Her hide was too thick for most magic to penetrate. That was fine. Harry reached into his trouser pocket, feeling around for the correct vial. When he found it, Harry threw it right at the erumpent's horn and dropped to the ground, casting every protective charm he knew, whispering frantically.

The explosion went off like an atomic bomb. The potion, brewed under his dad's intense supervision, was made from refined fluid extracted from an erumpent horn. It was used almost exclusively in demolitions when all other magical solutions failed. Combining it with an erumpent horn created an explosive cascade. It sounded, smelled, felt like he was being shelled in a warzone. He didn't dare move until the explosions stopped, even as the ground rocked and heated beneath him.

When it was finally over, Harry shakily pushed himself up. Most of the hedges around him were gone, as was the erumpent. He hoped she didn't land in the audience.

Percy was thrown to the ground as a deafening explosion shook the quidditch pitch like an earthquake. He scrambled back to his feet, watching in dumb horror as a full grown female erumpent who was *clearly* pregnant arced through the sky. The explosion had been strong enough to break the spell over the top of the maze.

Things were not going well.

People began to scream. His patrol had taken him near the judge's table. Professor Dumbledore had stood, had even taken his wand out. Percy was relieved. A flying erumpent was extremely dangerous.

He did a double take. There was an *erumpent* in the maze?

Percy trusted the headmaster to deal with it, and he started to run. He needed to find Mr. Crouch.

Monty's ears were still ringing from the explosion. He had no idea what had happened, just that it happened in the direction Harry was.

He waited a few minutes before moving. The screaming from outside the maze had stopped, and it was quiet again. Hester had forced her way back into a pocket, unhappy with the noise. Monty didn't blame her.

Harry was doubled over, taking deep breaths. While the explosion wasn't great, it had cleared a huge swathe of hedge, which saved him some time. It also had the effect of killing a very large acromantula, and, sadly, a banshee. Harry could still see the runes glowing around her throat, silencing her. Now she would be silent forever.

He shook his head and started walking again. After some time, he passed by a very large, ornate mirror, and glanced at his reflection like a complete fucking idiot.

Mirror-Harry gave him an evil grin. Harry felt his own face forced into a smile. His mind raced, trying to think of what sort of enchantment it was. Mirror-Harry raised his arm, and Harry's arm rose too, his arm shaking as he was made to point his wand at his own head. He couldn't breathe, as Mirror-Harry wasn't breathing. Stars began appearing in his vision.

Flipendo, he thought fiercely.

Harry was knocked to the ground, thrown away from the mirror. He gasped for air, his entire body shaking.

“Fuck,” he wheezed, pointing his wand towards the mirror without looking. “*Bombarda.*”

Harry dragged himself away with one arm, the other shoved into his pocket. The number of potions he was going through was ridiculous. He already had to heal burst ear drums, burns, bruises, a broken wrist...

The threat to his life was serious. He should have thought of that. When he finally reached Monty... Just being near Monty could put his brother in danger

Harry pushed himself up, leaning against a hedge, still trying to catch his breath. He jerked when a scream pierced the night, then narrowed his eyes. It was from inside the maze, and had sounded like Fleur Delacour. Not wanting to run in whatever had made her scream, Harry climbed to his feet and moved on, stomping viciously on the cracked mirror as he passed it.

His son's cat was keeping him company. She had been intercepted while attempting to enter the maze, repeatedly, and now Severus was on cat guard duty.

Severus sighed in relief when his son broke free of the enchanted mirror. He had no idea where the object had come from, or how it had ended up in the maze. Harry had encountered numerous aberrations, though only those involved in constructing the maze would recognize them as such. The Ministry had to be called in to deal with the erumpent, and Amos Diggory had appeared to profane Severus' eyes as he and a team detained the beast.

There would be yet another investigation.

Then something troubling happened. As his son was taking a moment to recover, his mirror only showing hedge, all of the mirrors went blank. Then there was a scream. Severus waited to see sparks, but there was nothing. Only silence and darkness emanated from the maze. It left him with a sense of foreboding, and a pervasive fear for his child's life.

Severus turned on his heel, hurrying towards the judge's table, the cat running at his side.

The scream sent shivers down Monty's spine. His first instinct was to seek out the source and help, but he was still in the tournament. He was still winding through the hedge, making his slow way towards Harry.

Before him was a golden mist.

“Elimbum,” Monty whispered, smiling as the mist dispersed. He was glad for the list of books Harry had given him. There was so much magic in the world he didn’t know and had never heard of, but Limbo Mist was part of the fifth-year curriculum. It was rather inconsiderate to put it in a maze with someone who had yet to take any fifth-year classes, but based on the chaos happening in Harry’s area, Monty counted himself lucky. He didn’t even have to dispel it, he could have walked right through, no harm done.

It had to be a set up.

Once the mist was completely dispersed, Monty moved on. After a few steps, he started to run.

Harry found his path blocked by Viktor Krum.

“Alright?” Harry said, looking him over. There was a strange light in Viktor’s eyes, and it took Harry a moment too long to understand.

Viktor’s arm whipped out, pointing his wand directly at Harry.

“Cru—”

Harry didn’t let him get past the first syllable. Disarming people was one of the easier wordless spells he knew. The incantation was simply too long for it *not* to be. Viktor’s wand was ripped from his hand. Harry let it fly off into the dark.

Viktor stared at him blankly, expressionlessly, very much like someone under Imperius, then he ran at Harry.

Viktor Krum was not a fast runner. Harry blamed all the quidditch.

“Stupefy.”

The Bulgarian star seeker went down like a sack of potatoes.

An icy chill crawled over Harry’s skin, and he turned to face the hedge. He smiled to himself, then turned back to Krum.

“Fucking weak-minded idiot,” Harry said disdainfully, listening as his brother attacked the hedge, ultimately blasting a hole in it large enough to climb through.

“Are you okay?” Monty whispered.

“Yeah,” Harry said, kicking Viktor over so he wouldn’t choke on his own tongue. He had no idea why Hermione Granger was interested in someone with such a feeble mind. Then again, based on Monty’s complaints, Hermione fancied Ronald Weasley. She had a type.

“Imperius,” he said simply.

“Shouldn’t we send up sparks?” Monty asked quietly.

Harry sighed and did as his brother requested, shooting glittering red sparks into the air.

“No more talking,” he said, not lowering his wand. Monty was fine. He was alive, and Harry was going to keep him safe. “Let’s go.”

Monty grabbed Harry’s arm. Harry had just finished burning the caps off a gang of red caps, who were so traumatized by the experience they had fled without attacking. The previous obstacle had been an eerie black fire that had a table of potions in front of it. The fire had risen up all around them, trapping them in a ring of black flames. Harry had let Monty solve the riddle, which had been a nice break. He was glad there had been enough potion for both of them, and Hester.

But now there was something on the Marauder’s Map. A name. He tugged urgently on Harry’s shirt, who sighed and pulled it out to look down the collar.

“Neferneferuaten,” Harry said quietly. “I’ve heard that name before.” His eyes lit up. “She’s a sphinx. Wicked, let’s have a look.”

Since Monty was supposed to pretend to not be there, he quietly followed Harry. He was excited to meet a sphinx. Sphinges were among the rare magical creatures who could speak human languages, and were considered to have *human-like intelligence*.

Monty almost gasped aloud when he saw the sphinx. She was gorgeous, with the body of a large, powerful lioness and the head of a cunning, beautiful woman. He wondered if sphinges could contract human illnesses. He needed to look into it. She paced back and forth, watching Harry with a playful smile, her tail lashing teasingly.

“Have you ever met someone named Percy Weasley?” Harry asked out of the blue.

Monty gawked at him.

The sphinx blinked her big, golden eyes at him. “I shall answer your question, if you answer one of mine.”

“Go for it,” Harry said.

“What grows in darkness, and never in light? What travels by day, and rests by night?”

“Clocks,” Harry said right away.

Monty grabbed his head. Harry was going to end up fighting a sphinx.

"You never said it had to be a correct answer," Harry pointed out.

The sphinx narrowed her eyes. "I have met Percy Weasley."

"You asked me two questions," Harry said.

The sphinx's claws shot out, and her tail whipped violently. "Yes. You have answered one."

Harry pulled out his shirt again, then looked up at the sphinx. "Do you eat cat food?"

The sphinx's eyes flashed, and she gave a menacing, guttural growl that raised the hair on Monty's arms. She did not, however, attack. Monty knew sphinges were renowned for their virtuous behavior. If she had promised to guard this part of the maze, to ask a riddle, she would not violate that agreement.

Monty slapped his head when Harry conjured a giant ball of yarn for the sphinx, who looked at it hatefully. Harry smirked at her, then turned and walked away.

"That was really rude," Monty hissed as they backtracked.

"I'm really angry," Harry said evenly. "I'm not feeling very polite at the moment. I bet she loved Percy, though. I'm going to tell him she remembers him. It'll make his day."

To Monty's horror, Harry adopted a dreamy expression and started chuckling to himself. Monty quietly attempted to remove whatever hex Harry had undoubtedly been hit with.

Harry sighed in relief when he finally reached the center of the maze. He gestured for his brother to stay well behind him, out of the line of fire if something else ran out at Harry. It was a long walk to the plinth the Triwizard Cup sat on. It shined happily at him, illuminating the path with its golden light.

He slowed his steps, his anxiety growing. He reached into a pocket for a Calming Draught. He had taken one before entering the maze, but his nerves were raw. He was waiting for *something* to happen.

Harry was only a few feet from the Triwizard Cup. Once he touched it, the tournament would finally be over. They would be free.

He reached out for the cup.

"Harry!" Monty shouted. "It's Mr. Crouch! He's—"

"*Avada kedavra!*"

“*Avis!*” Harry shouted, a flock of sparrows exploding from his wand. He dove to the ground, yanking out his shirt to see where Crouch was. How had he made it through the maze so quickly? Harry hadn’t been paying any attention to the people *outside* of the maze, only what was *inside* of it. He was stupid, so unforgivably stupid.

“Monty, run!” he shouted, watching as green light washed over the birds, as birds fell lifelessly to the ground, over and over again. “Get away from here! Go!”

“You’re not going anywhere, Potter!” Crouch roared, in a way utterly unlike the man. Harry scrambled to his feet, trying to see where Crouch was. He reached for the Triwizard Cup, hoping it would end whatever the hell was going on

“I don’t think so!” Crouch shouted, appearing at the end of another path, casting a spell, knocking the cup off the plinth. It spun away.

Things were happening too fast. Harry didn’t hesitate. He slashed his wand through the air. “*Sectumsempra!*”

Crouch countered it. There was no way, no *possible* way for him to know that spell, to know how to counter.

“*Stupefy!*” he heard his brother shout. Crouch dismissively flicked his wand, and the red light spluttered out.

“You disgusting mudblood!” Crouch growled at Harry, circling towards him. “Always in the way! *Avada—*”

Harry tried to disarm him, which jerked Crouch to the side as he hung onto his wand.

“*Stupefy! Stupefy!*”

Crouch whipped towards the sound of Monty’s voice. The Triwizard Cup rose from the ground. Crouch flicked his wand, and it shot through the air, racing towards where Monty had been.

“*Accio!*” Harry screamed desperately. “Monty, run!”

Monty didn’t run. Harry heard a loud hiss, and an abruptly visible occamy was flying directly at Crouch.

Harry’s world contracted around these things. The Triwizard Cup still spinning towards him. Hester, flying towards Crouch. Crouch, his wand pointed in Monty’s direction. At Hester.

Harry aimed at Crouch’s robes. “*Flagrante!*”

He heard Crouch’s agonized shriek as he was engulfed in flames, and then the Triwizard Cup crashed into him. Before Harry could cast another spell, he felt a tug. His eyes widened in understanding as he was ripped through space and time.

Monty had not stopped casting spells. Hester was attacking Crouch's hand as he rolled on the ground, trying to get his wand away from him.

Harry was gone. Crouch had attacked them. He had tried to kill Harry. He had used the Killing Curse.

"*Hester!*" he hissed, calling her back before Crouch decided to target her. Not knowing what else to do, he shot red sparks into the air. Then Monty finally did what Harry had asked.

He ran.

Monty ran as fast as he could, ripping his invisibility cloak off, shoving it into a pocket. It didn't matter anymore. The cup had been a portkey. Whoever had wanted Monty to win had wanted him alive, and now they had Harry instead.

His blood pounded in his ears. He kept shooting red sparks into the air, hoping desperately that someone would show up. That someone, anyone would help.

Harry landed flat on his back, wincing as he slammed into the ground. It winded him. He belatedly remembered a conversation he had with Mr. Slaw Cram.

"How can you tell if something's a portkey?"

"Ha! When you use it!"

He tried to roll onto his stomach, knowing wherever Crouch had wanted his brother to go was likely inimical to human life.

Harry couldn't move. He struggled to open his eyes, to make his fingers twitch, to do *anything*.

"Where's Barty?" a woman asked.

Harry knew that voice. It was Crouch's old secretary, Bertha Jorkins. He didn't understand what was going on. Why would Percy's boss and his former secretary conspire to kidnap Monty Potter?

"Master Barty says we is to start without him," a high-pitched voice said. Harry felt himself being lifted from the ground. Light as a feather, stiff as a board. "Master Barty is very busy!"

"You think I don't know that, elf?" Jorkins said.

Elf. It was a bloody *house-elf*.

“Who quit her job to take care of Tom?” Jorkins demanded. “Me!”

“Yes, you is a bad secretary,” the house-elf said haughtily.

Harry was rotated through the air, then pushed against something hard. Stone. He heard Jorkins conjure ropes which wrapped tightly around Harry, tying him to the stone. His wand was yanked from his hand.

“Hurry!”

Harry was glad his eyes were closed. He knew that voice. He heard it in his nightmares.

The Dark Lord.

“Yes, Tom!” Bertha said in a sing-song.

The ropes dug into him as his body sagged. The petrification was gone, but he was wandless.

Harry opened his eyes to slits, enough to see he was in a graveyard. He couldn’t move. He closed his eyes again. A severing charm. Fire. Something to get the ropes.

His head was slammed into the gravestone. There was a horrible *crack*, and sickening, slick pain. Harry's eyes flew open.

“You stay where you are!” the house-elf said, putting her little fists on her hips. “No magic, or Winky will make you sleep!”

Harry blinked at her, his vision blurry. Winky. Crouch’s house-elf.

Winky began enthusiastically stirring a putrid concoction. It looked like bile. It was in a man-sized stone cauldron right in front of Harry. Bertha Jorkins was cooing over the most fucked up baby he ever seen. Hairless, scaly, flattened face, the dark red of a blood clot. It looked like roadkill. It looked corrupted.

Harry avoided looking directly at it. At the Dark Lord. Even in that reduced form, he oozed power like a festering wound.

Winky stoked the fire higher and higher.

“It’s ready, Master Tom!”

“Now!” the Dark Lord, *Master Tom*, shrieked. Did Winky and Jorkins not know?

Jorkins had a blissful expression as she gently lowered the Dark Lord into the cauldron, as if she were giving her baby a bath.

It was an obscene display.

It was a resurrection.

The Dark Lord was returning, and he wanted to use Monty to do it.

Harry tipped his aching head back. He could not see a way of getting out of the situation. He didn't know much about house-elf magic, or what Winky was capable of. If she had been given orders to keep Monty here, she would. There was no way around it. The house-elf's highest law was her master's bidding. Their magic ensured it.

He looked at the sky. It was a beautiful night in the graveyard. The stars were out.

He was going to die. If it was going to end like this, he should have told Monty everything. He should have spent more time with his brother. What a waste of a life.

The Dark Lord's shriveled body sank to the bottom of the cauldron.

"Alright," Jorkins said, raising her wand. "I've been practicing for months! *Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!*"

Harry watched numbly as the grave beneath him cracked. Bone powder trickled through the cracks, rising into air as Jorkins directed it into the cauldron. The potion sparked violently and turned blue. Harry committed these details to memory. If he lived, he could tell his dad.

His dad was going to kill him.

Winky had begun to cry. For some inexplicable reason, she was climbing onto the rim of the cauldron.

"*Flesh of the servant, willingly given, you will revive your master!*"

Winky threw herself into the cauldron. The potion flared a brutal red as her body vanished.

"Your turn," Jorkins said, walking up to him. Harry watched her. He didn't bother struggling, not with her wand pointed right at him. She pulled a knife out of her robes. "*Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe!*"

Jorkins cut deep into his right arm. Too deep. She collected his blood in a vial, making a face of disgust, and carried it to the cauldron.

The potion turned a pure, incandescent white, the sparks rising higher and higher, blinding Harry. It thrummed with magic. Blood was still flowing out of his arm. He was going to die. He wished he had told Monty...

The light vanished. Harry blinked tears away from his eyes. The potion had vaporized. Dense white mist poured out of the cauldron, filling the graveyard. Jorkins sneezed.

Harry closed his eyes again. *Blood of the enemy*. It could have been anyone. Why had the Dark Lord wanted Monty?

What would he do to Harry when he realized the house-elf and the idiot had used the wrong boy?

Harry slowed his breathing. He had to clear his mind. The Dark Lord would kill him, there was no question of that. What had his dad said...

"If you are not useful to the Dark Lord, there is no purpose in your existence."

"Robe me."

"Of course, Tom!"

Harry opened his eyes again. A tall, slender figure had risen from within the cauldron. Harry didn't know what the fuck was going on with Jorkins. She hurried forward with an armful of robes and draped them over the Dark Lord's head as if it were a daily occurrence.

The Dark Lord climbed out of the cauldron. Harry kept his face blank. He was in the presence of the Dark Lord Voldemort, the greatest dark wizard their world had ever known.

His face was a deathly white, his eyes pits of fiery red, his nose flat, his lips nonexistent. He looked exactly like Harry remembered him.

The Dark Lord's gaze bore into Harry. His eyes narrowed, and Harry watched, fascinated, quietly horrified, his decision already made, as the Dark Lord's anger grew.

"You are not Monty Potter," the Dark Lord said, his voice a malevolent hiss. It promised pain. It promised death.

Harry had promised to *live*.

He lowered his eyes demurely. "No, my Lord. I am merely your humble servant."

Humble Servants

Chapter Summary

The Graveyard

Chapter Notes

Yep

“I am merely your humble servant.”

The graveyard was silent, save for the crackling of the flames beneath the cauldron. Then the Dark Lord began laughing. It was a wretched thing, sharp and caustic. It made Harry’s skin crawl.

“Look at me, Harry Evans.”

Harry looked up, his eyes widening in surprise.

The Dark Lord’s smile was cruel. “Oh, yes, I remember you. Harry Evans. A Slytherin.” He moved closer to Harry, his slitted red eyes glowing with sinister power. “A *mudblood*.”

Harry swallowed. “I don’t know, my Lord.”

The Dark Lord’s eyes narrowed. “Do not lie to Lord Voldemort,” he hissed. “I always know, Harry Evans.”

Harry looked down again. “The muggle woman who raised me never said who my father was.”

The Dark Lord grabbed his face, forcing Harry’s head up. “Blood of the enemy.”

Harry started shaking, his breath hitching. He thought of all the time he spent in the Daily Prophet archives, frantically trying to find out who his father was. “I’m a Slytherin. He only accepted the pure. Why would the Sorting Hat put a mudblood in his house?”

The Dark Lord kept staring at him. “A muggle mother. An unknown father.” His grip tightened on Harry’s face, his long, thin fingers squeezing him painfully. “Are you my enemy, Harry Evans?”

Harry tried to shake his head, but the Dark Lord was strong. "I wish to serve you. I could be useful."

"Tom?"

The Dark Lord kept staring at Harry. Harry would give him anything he wanted. Everything he could. His friends. The woman he called his mother. His body. His obsessive research into the Killing Curse, into the blackest magics contained in the Hogwarts library. Lying, stealing, killing. Percy.

"Tom?" Jorkins repeated. Harry felt a flash of annoyance at her. She was a fool. A useless fool.

The Dark Lord smiled. He released Harry's face, reaching into his robes. He pulled out a wand. Thirteen and a half inches. Yew. Phoenix feather.

He waved his wand at Jorkins. She rose from the ground with a yelp, and was thrown against the headstone to which Harry was still tied.

"I have heard much about you, Harry Evans," the Dark Lord said over Jorkins' confused whimpering. "My most loyal servants seem to cross wands with you with alarming frequency."

"My Lord?" Harry said.

"Silence," the Dark Lord snapped.

Harry looked down.

"First poor Quirinus," the Dark Lord mused. "The Philosopher's Stone was a great loss to me, Harry Evans."

Harry nodded mutely. It was Quirrell's own fault.

"Then dear Barty, who has often complained about the mudblood tainting his tournament," the Dark Lord continued. "A mudblood with a penchant for dark magic."

Harry swallowed again.

"Tom, what's going on?" Jorkins whimpered at Harry's feet. "Are you better now?"

"Indeed, Bertha," the Dark Lord said. Harry looked through his eyelashes. The Dark Lord was examining his own body, a body created with Harry's blood.

"You have been quite the thorn in my side, Harry Evans," the Dark Lord said, looking at him again. "You stand where Monty Potter should."

Harry sighed. "I wanted to win."

The Dark Lord stared at him for a moment, then threw his head back to laugh. Then he moved so quickly Harry didn't even have time to flinch. Jorkins flew through the air again, crashing into a crumbling cross.

A snake slithered out of the darkness. Nagini. She was huge, twelve feet long and nearly as thick as Harry was wide. She circled them. Harry. The Dark Lord. The grave.

"You stand," the Dark Lord said, his voice low, dangerous, "upon the grave of my *muggle* father. A fool, much like your muggle mother, Harry Evans."

"They are all fools, my Lord," Harry breathed. "Ignorant, pathetic fools."

The Dark Lord smiled at him. "Oh, yes. The muggles wouldn't approve of a thing like *you*, would they? *Halber Mensch*?" He started laughing again. "Nor the pureblood boy you desire."

The Dark Lord kept chuckling to himself, turning to look around the graveyard. "Barty should have been here. What happened to Barty, Harry Evans?"

"He tried to kill me," Harry said. "He failed."

The Dark Lord spun towards him.

Harry looked to the side. "A thousand galleons—"

The Dark Lord started laughing again. "You would kill for money?"

"I would kill whoever you asked of me, my Lord," Harry said evenly. "No one would suspect a mudblood." He closed his eyes. "Please, let me serve you. Allow me to make amends."

"Tom?" Jorkins mumbled. "What..."

"You wish to serve Lord Voldemort, Harry Evans?" the Dark Lord hissed.

The ropes crushing Harry to the headstone suddenly vanished, and he fell to the ground in a heap. Harry's head ached. Blood sluggishly dripped from his arm. It was hard to think. He had to be useful. He had to live.

The Dark Lord walked over to where Jorkins lay. The woman groaned when he kicked her over.

"Tom...you've got your body back. We did it..."

"Give me your arm," he said.

"Did you want to see my tattoo again?" she mumbled, holding her left arm up. The sleeve fell back, revealing a dark mark. The Dark Lord pressed his fingers against it, and Jorkins screamed. Harry kept his head down as Jorkins began weeping.

“We shall see who will be brave enough to return,” the Dark Lord said with a sneer, releasing Jorkins’ arm. “And which fools will fear the return of their lord. Get up, Harry Evans.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Harry said, pushing himself upright. He swayed, his head spinning, but took a breath and steadied himself. He called a cat *lady*. He could call someone *lord*.

“You have thwarted me, Harry Evans,” the Dark Lord said, beginning to pace. The snake followed. “The Philosopher’s Stone. And now your blood runs in my veins.”

He drew closer to Harry, grabbing him by the throat. “And yet, I am strong. I would be stronger still had I used the blood of my *true* enemy, which you have denied me.”

“The house-elf...” Harry wheezed. “Jorkins...If...I had...known...”

“If you had known?” the Dark Lord whispered, his hot, fetid breath choking Harry. He threw Harry to the ground.

“*Crucio!*”

Harry clenched his teeth together, white hot agony coursing through his veins. His back arched against his will. He squeezed his eyes shut. It was just pain. It was just a feeling. He could barely think through it. He didn’t need to think at all. He simply had to endure this punishment. He felt his body splitting apart, breaking along the seams.

Then it was over, leaving Harry a shaking, pathetic wreck in the dirt. He kept his eyes closed, struggling to breathe.

The Dark Lord was laughing again. Harry noted distantly that he laughed a lot. He enjoyed hurting others. It amused him.

“Pick up your wand,” the Dark Lord said, still laughing a little.

Harry reached out a shaking arm. He swallowed, then muttered, “*Accio.*”

His wand slapped against his hand. He stayed in the dirt, where he belonged.

“Get up, Harry Evans. Up!”

He obeyed as quickly as he could. Harry knew he was in a bad state.

“You wish to serve Lord Voldemort?” the Dark Lord said. He grabbed Harry’s shoulder and forced him towards Jorkins. “Then serve, Harry Evans, and know what the price of failure is!”

He could feel the snake pressing against him. The price of failure. He closed his eyes.

“Jorkins failed you,” he said. “She used me instead of Potter.”

“Yes,” the Dark Lord said, his voice high with amusement.

Harry nodded, though the motion made him nauseated.

“Tom?” Jorkins mumbled. “Can’t believe that nasty wizard cursed you...”

Jorkins’ words baffled Harry. It didn’t matter. He blinked, then focused his eyes on her. He had to prove himself. He needed to be useful. This woman had been part of a plan to kidnap his brother. His brother. He was a secret. Harry had to stay alive. He would do anything. He had to get back. He had to be useful. He knew what the Dark Lord wanted. What he had to prove.

Anger. He needed anger. He needed hate. He knew how the spell worked. He knew the words. He knew that to get out of this graveyard alive, someone else needed to die. It was her fault. It was her fault. She *deserved* to die.

He could not hesitate. He could not fail. He wouldn’t die. He wanted to go home.

He had to prove himself worthy.

He had to survive. He had to.

Harry raised his wand. He knew, he knew what he would have to do. He was ready.

He looked into Bertha Jorkins’ watery, confused eyes, and said two simple words.

“*Avada kedavra.*”

As soon as Severus saw the red sparks, he ran. The cat raced ahead of him, her fur standing on end. Dumbledore was somehow keeping up despite his advanced age.

His dark mark writhed on his arm.

Severus’ heart slammed viciously in his chest. Harry. His son. *His son.*

The red sparks did not cease. They formed a jagged line above the maze. Someone was desperate for help. He could even hear them. Delacour had already been retrieved, as had Krum. There was only Potter and his son left. The question that weighed on Severus’ mind was, which one was it?

“Meow!”

Monty Potter crashed through a hedge, an occamy flying frantically above him. He spun around, holding his wand out, his eyes wild, his arm shaking.

“Professor! Mr. Crouch! He tried to kill Harry! The cup was a portkey! Harry’s gone! You’ve got to do something!”

“Calm down, Monty,” Dumbledore said. “Where is Barty?”

“I don’t know,” Potter said, spinning around, his wand still held out. “Harry did something, set his robes on fire, and Hester got his wand.”

The occamy landed on Potter’s shoulder and shrieked. A broken wand dangled from her claws.

Lady Madeleine hissed, then darted away.

“No!” Monty shouted, running after her. “He’s dangerous!”

Severus started running again. He didn’t give a bloody fuck what Dumbledore did. A portkey. His son had been spirited away by a *portkey*.

He reached the center of the maze and found the cat attacking a heavily burned man, and Potter trying to pull her away as she hissed and spat.

“Stop, he knows where Harry is!” Potter shouted, struggling with the enraged cat. “Why does he look different?”

Severus came to a stop above the charred body of Barty Crouch. But a Barty Crouch he hadn’t seen for years. Who had been *dead* for years.

“What is the meaning of this?” he asked darkly.

Dumbledore had arrived. He looked at Barty Crouch Junior with a grave expression. “He will need to be taken to Poppy. I doubt he is in any state to explain himself, Severus.”

“What about Harry?” Potter demanded, brandishing the cat at them. “Where is he? He was trying to get *me* to touch the cup! Harry summoned it to himself!”

“That was very brave of him,” Dumbledore said quietly. He conjured a stretcher and levitated Crouch onto it.

Potter scoffed. “He could be dead!”

Severus closed his eyes. His son was *not* dead.

Percy Weasley burst onto the scene. “I can’t find Mr. Crouch anywhere, headmaster!”

Dumbledore sighed. “Percy, please escort Monty out of the maze.”

“But—” Potter objected. The cat struggled, and Potter set her down. She ran to Severus, pacing frantically. Potter suddenly cried out, slapping a hand to his scar.

“Monty,” Dumbledore said calmly. “There is nothing you can do now but wait. Please go with Percy. I need to discuss something with Professor Snape.”

“Where is Harry?” Weasley asked.

“We do not know,” Severus said tightly. “Now *leave*.”

Weasley flinched, then took Potter’s shoulder, seemingly oblivious to the occamy, and led him quickly away. He could hear Potter explaining what happened.

Severus looked at Crouch again. And then his dark mark began to burn.

He grabbed his arm, hissing in pain, cold with dread. His son was gone. The Dark Lord had returned.

“He’s calling me,” he said. He looked fiercely at Dumbledore. “Drop the anti-apparition spell.”

“Severus,” Dumbledore began.

“*Now*, Dumbledore!” Severus growled. “I will not stand here while my...student is dying at his feet!”

Dumbledore closed his eyes as if pained. Severus glowered at him. Would he have been so reluctant if it had been Potter taken away? Would he have let the Boy Who Lived die so easily?

“Very well,” Dumbledore said, opening his eyes again.

Severus turned on the spot.

Harry lowered his wand, watching Bertha Jorkins’ slack face with morbid curiosity. He had killed someone. It wasn’t that different from killing a troll, or a kelpie. She died like anything else. One minute alive, the next dead.

He didn’t know if his soul felt any different. If he even had one.

The Dark Lord was laughing again, with depraved glee.

Harry looked at the wand in his hand. He felt empty. He had killed a woman, a woman who he suspected had been expertly manipulated by a charming wraith in Albania. She had played her role, and now it was over.

“Well done, Harry,” the Dark Lord said, placing his cold, cruel hand on Harry’s shoulder. Harry turned to look at him. “How old are you?”

“Sixteen, my Lord,” he said.

The Dark Lord smiled broadly. It was horrifying. He spun Harry around to face the grave. “I killed my father when I was sixteen. I also believed I was a mudblood, for many years.”

“You are too powerful to be a mudblood,” Harry said.

The Dark Lord’s fingers clawed into his shoulder. “Indeed. Ah, here they are! My true family!”

Harry quietly stood by the Dark Lord’s side, numbed by the fact he was still alive, wondering at what the cost of that truly would be.

As soon as his feet touched the ground, Severus saw his son. Harry was alive. He was *alive*.

He was standing next to the Dark Lord.

Severus fell to his knees. He crawled forward, towards the feet of his master. He debased himself, as he had so many times in the past. Others were arriving. Others were crawling, murmuring *Master, Master*. He did not have his mask or robes. He did not care. His son was alive.

He stood, taking his place in the circle. He did not acknowledge Harry. Somehow, his son was alive. He did not care how, he did not care why. He only cared that Harry remained alive. He would do anything to ensure that.

They had discussed this. They had planned for the Dark Lord’s return. There were contingencies.

“Welcome, Death Eaters,” the Dark Lord said. “Severus, I believe this is your wayward student?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Severus said.

The Dark Lord pushed Harry forward. “Go join your new brothers and sisters, Harry.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said quietly. Severus finally looked at him. Harry had been brutalized. There was a jagged cut on his arm, blood trickling from his nose. He was scratched and bruised. He was limping. He was pale, deathly pale, and moved like he was in a daze.

Someone cleared his throat. “My Lord, if I may, the boy is a mudblood.”

“Silence, Lucius,” the Dark Lord said idly, watching Harry with keen eyes. Predatory eyes, as if calculating his worth. “I will get to you, my slippery friend.”

Harry walked steadily towards him, seemingly indifferent to the crowd of Death Eaters around him. *Brothers and sisters*, the Dark Lord had said. Severus stared blankly ahead. What had his son done?

Harry took a place next to Severus. The others shuffled away, distancing themselves from the mudblood child their lord had inexplicably added to their ranks.

“I smell guilt in the air,” the Dark Lord declared, sniffing. Severus clenched his teeth together. When he was Harry’s age, he had been overawed by such displays. As an adult, he found it gauche and pathetic.

However uncanny his behavior, the Dark Lord was in fact standing before them, and each person in the circle was fully aware of his capabilities.

He wanted to push Harry behind him, wanted to apparate them immediately to Cokeworth, but he was a spy. Severus had known for thirteen years what he would have to do once the Dark Lord returned. Running now would condemn them all. He had to stay. And if the Dark Lord killed his son in front of him...

Severus closed his eyes. The world asked too much of him.

It was hard to stand. Harry was tired. He tried to pay attention to what was happening around him. It was dark. He was in a graveyard.

He watched Killian’s mother fling herself at the Dark Lord’s feet, begging for his mercy. He frowned thoughtfully as the Dark Lord used the Cruciatus Curse on her. It didn’t seem to matter how dramatically he was implored. Everyone got the Cruciatus.

“I do not forgive,” the Dark Lord said. “I do not forget! I want thirteen years’ repayment!”

Harry sighed. He owed the Dark Lord a debt. The loss of the stone. The loss of Monty Potter’s blood, though his own was certainly good enough. He felt a sinking sense of dread. The basilisk. What if Lucius Malfoy told the Dark Lord about that? No, then he would have to admit to his own role in that fiasco.

Vincent’s dad was there too.

The Dark Lord explained how Harry’s blood was used to restore him to his former might. How he seduced Bertha Jorkins, wove a tale for her, gained her trust, her loyalty. A loyal servant in the Ministry. Barty Crouch, he knew. The elf had been there.

His dad was there. He had seen his dad crawling on his knees to kiss the Dark Lord’s robes. He doubted he would ever forget that.

“Harry Evans.”

Harry’s head snapped up, the world tilting away from him. He had a concussion, he suspected. He had lost a lot of blood. He had been tortured. He had killed a woman.

He was lucky to be alive.

“Yes, my Lord?”

The Dark Lord smiled at him. “You are the Triwizard Champion, are you not? The mudblood Slytherin?”

There was raucous laughter at this. The irony was not lost upon anyone.

“Go, Harry Evans,” the Dark Lord said, waving his arm. The golden Triwizard Cup rose from behind more graves, still glowing with a brilliant gold light. Harry silently watched it float towards him. He was losing track of time. He was pushed forward.

“Take your trophy,” the Dark Lord said, grinning at him. “You’ve earned it.”

Harry slammed face first into the ground and stayed there. He was to say nothing. He was to await orders.

The grass was cool and damp.

He was blasted with sound. Screaming, shouting, cheering, applause, running feet, people crying his name.

Someone picked him up. Harry kept his eyes closed, letting the Triwizard Cup fall from his limp fingers. He didn’t care about it anymore. He wanted to know if his brother was okay. His dad had said something about it. Crouch was the son. Injured, but alive.

“Almost there,” someone said.

The sound cut off. The astringent scent of the hospital wing stung his nose. He was being lowered into a bed. A vial was being pressed to his lips. A cat was purring at his side.

Harry threw an arm over his eyes as the cut on the other one was healed.

He was alive. His brother was safe. That was all that mattered.

The Shape of Things to Come

Chapter Summary

June 1995

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Karkaroff was gone.

Severus strode through the dungeons, failing to piece together what had occurred between his son touching the Triwizard Cup and the Dark Lord handing it to him in some twisted parody. He had seen the woman's body before he left. Bertha Jorkins. Had listened attentively to the Dark Lord's explanation of his return. The whispers of snakes. An encounter in Albania. A dead aunt. The secret servant. He knew his son was safely in the hospital wing. That his son's blood ran through the Dark Lord's veins.

The headmaster had requested Veritaserum. Barty Crouch Junior was alive. He had answers the headmaster wanted. The madness that had unfolded at the maze was a distant roar. Seeing Harry's broken body fall face down in the grass hadn't been the crowning moment of victory the audience desired. Harry had already been badly injured before he went to that graveyard.

Severus paused in front of the gargoyle. An extrajudicial interrogation in the headmaster's office was not entirely unheard of. It was only a matter of time until the Ministry arrived and threw Crouch back into Azkaban. He wanted to see his son. He wanted to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Harry was alive, that he would recover from his ordeal.

The Dark Lord wanted repayment.

"Coconut ice," he said acidly.

The gargoyle leapt aside and Severus rode the spiral staircase up, the Veritaserum weighing heavily in his pocket.

It was an odd group in the headmaster's office. Barty Crouch was strapped to a chair, the worst of his burns hastily healed. Monty Potter was there, with Sirius Black's arm draped protectively over him. McGonagall, who had her wand trained on Barty Crouch. The phoenix, who was so fickle he remained on his perch instead of flying down the hospital wing and doing something useful for once in his immortal life. The occamy was watching the phoenix intently. She still had the broken wand in her claws. Percy Weasley was there too, staring at Barty Crouch in naked horror. Dumbledore was sitting down, facing Crouch.

Severus could not fathom Dumbledore's intentions for having such people present. But he was the ever obedient servant, and tipped the Veritaserum into Barty Crouch's slack mouth, then stood back as the dead man was revived.

The story came out in stilted pieces. His mother taking his place in Azkaban. Years under Imperius at his father's home. Bertha Jorkins overhearing a house-elf speaking to him in a garden. Crouch's father casting a Memory Charm on her, one far too strong. Severus already knew of the Dark Lord's exploits in Albania. The snakes, rumors of a woman with magic traveling through the right forest at the right time. A dying aunt. The Quidditch World Cup, the Triwizard Tournament. His machinations. Crouch stealing Neville Longbottom's wand. The Dark Mark.

Jorkins had taken the Dark Lord to Barty Crouch. Severus took some pleasure in the fact the idiot woman was dead, but he knew what sort of *tests* the Dark Lord gave his followers, and the conclusion he came to was harrowing.

"And what happened to your father?" Dumbledore asked.

A crazed smile brought life to Crouch's face. "He's dead. I had to kill him to get Winky."

"Winky?" McGonagall asked.

Weasley cleared his throat. "Mr. Crouch's house-elf," he said quietly.

Crouch started laughing. "You were too good for him, *Weatherby*. My father never could appreciate what was right in front of him!"

Weasley paled.

"Your father is dead?" Dumbledore pressed.

"Long gone," Crouch sang. "Dead as a doornail. Quite dead, I'm afraid."

"How did you impersonate him?" Dumbledore.

Crouch tilted his head to the side at a painful angle. "Simple. So simple. An ageing potion. Even a child could brew it, or someone with the mind of a child, like Bertha." He giggled. "People always said I took after my father."

Severus narrowed his eyes. Crouch did look remarkably like his father as a younger man. He had the same build, the same facial structure, and had groomed himself to increase the likeness. Over a decade under Imperius.

The Dark Lord had sought another witch or wizard, another easy to bend his will as Quirrell had been. That it had been Bertha Jorkins, someone who knew Barty Crouch was alive, someone with such a high position in the Ministry. Someone who had given a flawless performance.

"Though it did take some time to find a good cauldron," Crouch mused, looking at Weasley. "It was an *excellent* report."

Weasley blanched, backing away to lean against a wall.

“You remind me of myself, Weasley,” Crouch said. “Twelve O.W.L.s. So *desperate* to prove yourself.” He chuckled, shaking his head fondly.

“The lake,” Severus said abruptly.

Crouch grinned. “Have you ever tried to Imperius a kraken? Big body, tiny brain. And Nessie, oh Nessie! I needed Winky for that one! Winky? Where’s Winky? Winky!” Crouch started cackling, his body shaking with amusement. “That’s right! She’s dead! Flesh of the servant! *My* flesh! *My* magic!”

Dumbledore shot Severus a look, then turned back to Crouch. “What did Lord Voldemort ask you to do?”

“I failed with the Longbottoms,” Crouch said, his voice low. The shift in mood was jarring. “I promised I would not fail again.”

The tournament had been rigged from start to finish. The house-elf had put Potter’s name in the Goblet of Fire. Crouch had been surprised by Harry’s display at the First Task. His son was too strong, too determined. The Second Task had been arranged to kill Harry off, but again he was a better wizard than Crouch had anticipated. He had to eliminate Harry. His father’s role in the Ministry gave him an excuse to acquire rare artifacts and creatures. The flying carpet ban was a gateway into Northern Africa. The sphinx. The erumpent. Severus was horrified to learn a nundu was still prowling the maze, waiting for his son.

But Crouch had failed. He did not know Potter had an invisibility cloak. He did not know about the occamy. He did not know Harry had been helping Potter the entire time, that he would do anything to protect him. He did not know Potter would defend Harry.

The Triwizard Cup was a portkey. It, like the Goblet of Fire, had been in Barty Crouch’s possession. He took it to the center of the maze himself. He disenchanting the mirrors and entered the maze again. He had been determined to kill Harry himself. The Dark Lord did not tolerate failure. He wanted Potter’s blood, the blood of the boy who vanquished him. The blood of a boy tied to him in prophecy. Severus could not say if the Dark Lord knew the significance of Lily’s sacrifice. He could not say if it mattered anymore.

“But you failed!” Potter burst out. He cradled the occamy in his arms, and she cried angrily. Black held Potter back, preventing the foolish boy from throwing himself at Crouch. “You messed up! You got the wrong person!”

Crouch started laughing again, his voice cracking with unabated joy. “The Dark Lord has risen! You’ve felt it, haven’t you, Snape? We all felt it! Who will join him? Who will flee? He is returned to power! And should he punish me for my failure, my suffering shall be exquisite!”

Potter spun to face him. “Felt what? What happened?”

Severus closed his eyes, then pushed up his sleeve.

“Crouch is correct,” he said neutrally, keeping perfectly still as those in the room stared at his livid dark mark. It still burned. “The Dark Lord has been restored to power. I have seen him myself.”

Crouch’s laughter died down. “You lucky bastard.”

Dumbledore rose, a rare expression on his face. A look of utter disgust for Barty Crouch. Severus had seen that same disgust directed at him, while he begged Dumbledore to protect Lily.

Crouch was rendered unconscious, ropes tightening around him.

“Minerva, please escort Monty to his dormitory,” the headmaster said. “Sirius, please fetch Remus. Percy, you may use the floo to contact the Ministry. Keep an eye on Barty. Severus, accompany me to the hospital wing. I would like for Harry to share his side of the story.”

Harry wished he wasn’t awake, but Madam Pomfrey had made him stay awake. The chaos outside of the hospital wing was over. He was alive, his friends knew that, it was fine. He looked at the new scar he had, a long, jagged line down his right arm. His blood was all over that graveyard. His blood ran through the Dark Lord’s veins.

The emptiness within was an abyssal chasm, absorbing everything he cared about. Everything he loved. He had escaped the graveyard, but he had not escaped the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord knew him. The Dark Lord remembered him.

He had to stay alive. He had to warn them. He had to protect his brother. He hadn’t known his dad would come when called. It had felt like it was only him and the Dark Lord. Just Harry, holding the fate of the world in his hands. That everything, *everything*, had rested on his survival.

What had he done?

He stared at the blank expanse of ceiling. He had spent half his life staring at that blankness. It could have been his brother in that graveyard. He doubted his brother would have made it out alive. His brother, who would rather die than kneel at the Dark Lord’s feet. Harry wasn’t good like that. He wasn’t noble. His parents had been on opposite sides of the war. He had known that, one day, he would have to choose.

The doors to the hospital wing opened. Madam Pomfrey yelled, to no avail. She could scare away students. She could not scare away the headmaster.

Harry kept staring at the ceiling. He did not want to talk to the headmaster. He couldn’t tell the headmaster what he wanted to know. The Dark Lord did not want his return advertised.

“A spy is only effective so long as no one knows he is one. If you are not useful to the Dark Lord, there is no purpose in your existence.”

He wasn't a spy. He wasn't his dad. The Dark Lord did not need redundancies. He couldn't lie, he could only misdirect, dissemble, give truths that wouldn't get him outright killed. He had to give the Dark Lord what he wanted, had to be of use.

Someone sat beside his bed.

“Harry.”

Lady Madeleine began growling.

“I need to know what happened after you touched the portkey.”

Harry closed his eyes. He could lie, he could tell the truth, he could say nothing. What did the Dark Lord want? People needed to know. They needed to be warned. His brother. Monty needed to be ready. The Dark Lord was back. It was happening again. It was all happening again, and it was his fault. It was his fault for being weak.

The Dark Lord had used his blood. Harry knew, deep down, that if he ran, he would be hunted to the ends of the earth. It was not something the Dark Lord would forget. He did not forget. He did not forgive. They had got the wrong boy, and the Dark Lord was angry. There was no escape. He had to be useful.

Harry said nothing.

“Headmaster,” his dad said. “Perhaps it would be prudent to let Evans rest.”

The headmaster sighed. “Harry, please, anything you remember could be crucial.”

The blood protection. His mother's protection. Dumbledore had cast the spell.

Harry closed his eyes. “My blood was taken.”

Lady Madeleine kept growling, crouching on Harry's chest protectively.

“Thank you, Harry,” Dumbledore said. He opened his eyes and saw the headmaster stand, a strange expression on his face. Harry did not know the man well enough to say what it was. He said everything while saying almost nothing. He trusted his dad to extrapolate.

Harry swallowed. “I want to see Percy.”

Dumbledore looked down at him. Harry looked back.

“Tournament business,” Harry said quietly. “I won, didn't I?”

Dumbledore sighed. “Yes, Harry, I believe you did.”

The noise in the headmaster's office shook the walls. Silver instruments were spinning, the Minister was attempting to summon a dementor, Amelia Bones was shouting at him, the phoenix was singing his mournful, eternal song. The headmaster was calmly explaining, Professor Snape was pulling up his sleeve.

Percy stood alone in the chaos. He was going to face an inquiry at work. Mr. Crouch had been impersonated by a marked Death Eater for almost a year. Impersonated by his own son. He had been the man's personal secretary for months. He had worked tirelessly to rise in the man's esteem. He had worked more closely with him than anyone. He had been working for a Death Eater, a Death Eater whose sole goal was the resurrection of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. And he had succeeded.

Harry.

A hand fell on Percy's shoulder. The headmaster.

"Harry wishes to see you," the headmaster said quietly. "Tournament business, I believe"

Percy was given a heavy sack of galleons. The prize money. He did not know where the Triwizard Cup was. It had been a portkey. A portkey that had taken Harry to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Harry was a muggleborn. Somehow, he was alive.

Percy drifted through the corridors like a ghost. The castle's ghosts were conspicuously absent. The portraits whispered to each other. He clung to the fact that Harry was alive. It was his fault. He had proposed the changed age limit. The Death Eater impersonating Mr. Crouch had agreed. Bertha Jorkins had agreed. Bertha Jorkins had been working for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The Minister denied it. The Ministry denied it. There was no proof, only the words of a deranged Death Eater. They did not want to believe it. Harry's survival was a miracle. They could not survive on miracles. He would be facing an inquiry. The bag of galleons weighed him down. A life-changing amount of money.

Someone was raging outside of the hospital wing.

"This is your fault! This is all your fault! He's hurt again!"

"Astrid, please!"

"No! You keep letting him get hurt!"

"Ministry business," Percy mumbled, passing through the doors. Madam Pomfrey guided him to where Harry was. The curtains shut behind him. The silence was absolute.

The bag slipped from his hand, galleons spilling across the floor. A fortune.

It was a familiar scene. Harry, pale and drawn, dark bruises blossoming across his skin. He was sitting up, a hand gripping the fur of the cat at his side. His shirt had been removed, the

seahorse shirt, a charmed muggle shirt. It was draped lovingly across the back of a chair. Harry had a new scar, a long, jagged line that was puffy and inflamed.

Harry turned to look at him, lifting a hand. His dark eyes were fathomless. Percy had never seen such a devastating sight. Harry was alive.

He pulled Harry into his arms. Harry gripped his robes, crushing Percy to him.

“He’s back,” Harry whispered. His voice made Percy shudder, his words made him sick with fear. “He’s back, and he’s angry, Percy. He’s so angry. He’s angry with *me*. He knows about you, Percy. He knows how much you mean to me. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I should have never got close to you. I should have never talked to you. This should have never started. I’m sorry. He takes, Percy. He takes, and takes, and takes, and I had to give. I had to give him something. I’m so sorry. It’s happening again. It’s all happening again. You know what he did last time. You know what he’s going to do. He doesn’t want them to know. He’ll start with the Ministry. You know what he did. The Ministry, he already has people there. Loyal followers. They have been waiting. *He* has been waiting. Thirteen years. It’s a bad luck number. I always thought Halloween was the worst day. Thirteen years. I’m so sorry. I should never have spoken to you. I can’t forgive myself for that. I had to do things, Percy. I’m going to have to do things. You’re in the Ministry, you’re useful. I have to be useful, or he’ll kill me. He’ll kill me. He’ll kill everyone. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Percy kissed him. He could taste the tears on Harry’s lips. He could taste the blood. Harry was shaking. He was terrified, incoherently terrified. Percy was from a family of blood traitors. They had already stood against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. They were purebloods, but their allegiances made them targets.

“Don’t,” Harry mumbled, pulling back. “Don’t. I don’t deserve this. I don’t deserve you.”

Percy kissed him again. His heart was breaking. Harry was alive. He had no idea what Harry had done to survive, what he would have to do. He did not care in that moment. He only cared that Harry was here, and warm, and alive. Harry had stayed alive, and he was warning Percy of what was to come.

“I never should have started this,” Harry whispered. “I never should have let anyone near me. It’s dangerous to be near me, Percy. It’s dangerous to know me.”

“I don’t care,” Percy said, brushing Harry’s tears away. Percy had no idea what he could do, what he could say, what had truly happened to Harry, what he had done. “Nothing matters, except you.”

The hospital wing was silent again. Percy was gone. He had been such a fool.

Harry's eyes were fixed on the ceiling. He was in a potion-induced haze. It was only a matter of time. The parents of so many people he knew had been in that graveyard. He knew their children. He helped them with homework. He played gobstones with them. He ate with them in the Great Hall. His friends.

Crabbe. Goyle. Malfoy. Nott. Avery. Mulciber. Rookwood. The children of Death Eaters. Children like him.

The icy feeling across his skin alerted him. The curtains parted. His brother was standing there, looking like he hadn't slept for days. But Monty was safe. Unharmmed. Not a scratch on him.

Monty hesitated.

Harry smiled at him, and his brother was a blur of motion. Harry caught his little brother in his arms. The terror that had clawed away at him retreated. His brother was safe. The Dark Lord's plan had failed. Harry would say anything, do anything, *be* anything to keep Monty safe. Even if his brother hated him for it.

Even if he hated himself.

Featherby House was dark and quiet. A sole light was on in a parlor room. Percy walked up the steps and knocked firmly on the door. It opened on well-oiled hinges.

"Master Percy?" Nesty, the Prewett family house-elf, asked. "You is here very late. Mistress is retiring soon."

"I need to speak with her," Percy said. "It is a matter of urgency."

Nesty led him to the parlor where Aunt Muriel was reading the *Evening Prophet*. The front page had a picture of a flying erumpent. If Percy managed to keep his current job, he would have to deal with that. But that was a matter for the morning.

Since leaving Harry, Percy had thought. He had thought about his life, his family, his role in the Ministry, his blood status, Harry's blood status, what the future held for them. There were too many unknowns, but the lines had already been drawn. There was Dumbledore, there was the Dark Lord, and there was the Ministry, the staging ground.

"What is it, Percival?" Aunt Muriel asked. "You were there, correct? Is it true that Slytherin boy of yours won?"

"It is," Percy said, not denying that Harry was his. It was far too late for that. Harry needed him. He needed Harry. It was simple.

Percy stood before his great-aunt. "The Dark Lord has returned."

The paper fell to the floor. She stared at him in disbelief. “No.”

“Yes,” Percy said, moving closer to her. He knelt down, taking one of her shaking, withered hands in his own. There was no comfort in it. There was no going back from this. They would test his resolve. He would not fail. His loyalty was total, unquestioning, absolute.

He looked his great-aunt in the eyes, his mind already made. It had been a long time coming.

“I can’t be a Weasley anymore.”

Severus stared across the grounds. He could see the maze, the destruction that had been wrought within. The headmaster’s office was in disarray. Crouch was gone, in Ministry custody. Fudge was in denial. The Order was being reformed, its members scattered to the winds. Instructions had been given. Plans were being made. He would soon return to the Dark Lord’s side, leaving his son to rot in the hospital wing.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said.

He looked away from the window, meeting the headmaster’s eyes.

“I believe now is the time you tell me,” Dumbledore said, his gaze steely. “Who is Harry Evans?”

Chapter End Notes

And that's the Goblet of Fire

A [song](#) for Harry and Percy <3

No Regrets

Chapter Summary

Epilogue - July 1995

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Take your potion, Harry.”

Harry gazed into the swirling red liquid, brewed by his father. He was being released from the hospital wing in time for the Leaving Feast.

A spasm shook his body, but the potion didn’t spill. The cup was charmed to prevent that. The Dark Lord had kept him under the Cruciatus for a long time.

He pressed the cup to his lips, drinking deeply to get it over with. He hadn’t seen his dad for days, yet he had managed to find the time to brew this for Harry. Harry thought it was a good thing his dad had so quickly responded to the Dark Lord’s summons. He had been the first Death Eater there, the first on his knees.

The potion was thick and warm. It left a film on Harry’s tongue. It took ages to get rid of the taste of blood.

Madam Pomfrey gently took the cup from his hands. He was suddenly *Harry* to her. To the headmaster. It didn’t put him at ease, it didn’t feel warm and welcoming. It put him on edge. He felt like he was losing control. He had too many things worth losing.

“Run along,” she said. “Your friends are waiting for you.”

The Great Hall was loud and vibrant. The walls were hung with banners of silver and green. The Slytherin table was in high spirits. Harry had won the Triwizard Tournament. Slytherin had won the House Cup. Their star was on the rise.

No one knew what happened in the maze. No one knew what happened in the graveyard. There were rumors. The disappearance of Barty Crouch. Harry admitted to having fought him. Monty had been yelling about it. There were whispers. The Weasleys were a closed circle at the Gryffindor table, Luna huddled protectively in their midst. Monty had friends.

He had allies. He had people who would stand with him, who would fight with him, who would believe in him.

Astrid was fighting with Adrian over Harry. She was smiling. He heard her screaming at Professor McGonagall outside of the hospital wing. He even heard Professor McGonagall crying. He was happy for her. She deserved to have her favorite aunt in her life. He disliked when old people cried. He could remember his gran crying silently, chain smoking, staring out of a window waiting for her daughters to come home.

He hadn't touched his wand in days.

He was a murderer.

The food spread in front of him was unappealing. Harry did not want to be in the Great Hall. He wanted to be alone. He felt like he was corrupting everything he touched. That everyone around him was just a means for the Dark Lord to exact his revenge. He knew how to make people suffer.

His brother was subdued. Monty thought it was his fault for being targeted. It was not Monty's fault. Monty was a victim. Monty had saved his life. If he had not called out, Crouch would have killed him. He had not been at his best, far from it. Harry knew that. He knew it wasn't his fault either, but it was harder to believe that.

The headmaster stood, calling the Great Hall to attention. Harry went very still. He looked at his dad, who was staring back at him. There was a ringing in his ears. Lady Madeleine was sleeping on his feet, purring. His dad was back. Albus Dumbledore knew. He knew.

Harry took a shaky breath. All it had taken was a little blood, a dark line down his arm, and everything came spilling out.

He tipped his head to look up at the ceiling. It was a beautiful night at Hogwarts. The stars were out.

Harry closed his eyes as the headmaster began speaking.

"The Ministry of Magic does not wish me to tell you this..."

"Is it true?"

Harry was slumped against the side of the compartment, staring out of the window. He was finally going home.

He sighed, then looked at Jasmine. She was scared. They were all scared, even though idiots like Draco Malfoy were excited for the Dark Lord's return. He had no idea what it was like.

Harry barely remembered the war, he had been a baby, but he remembered how it felt. The all-encompassing fear. The helplessness.

He had stood in the Dark Lord's presence.

He knew.

"Yes," Harry said quietly.

Phoebe started crying. Terence put an arm around her, looking lost. Adrian was staring at Jasmine, his expression unnaturally blank. He was in shock. Jasmine was in the most danger.

"How are you still alive?"

This was Cassius.

"Ask a bone," Harry said, looking out of the window again.

"Harry," Astrid said. He could hear the strength in her voice. She already knew. Her aunt was Minerva McGonagall. They all knew where their loyalties lay. Thought they knew.

"I don't know," he said, watching the countryside pass in a blur. "I barely remember anything."

"He wanted Potter," Jasmine concluded. "He must have. Harry, you could have *died*."

"He *should* be dead," Cassius said. He sounded confused. "I don't understand."

Harry snorted. "Join the fucking club."

Platform Nine and Three Quarters emptied quickly. Kids were crying. Derek Wilkes was wandering around. No one was there to pick him up. Xenophilius Lovegood had seized Luna and apparated her right off the platform. Others followed his lead. Harry had stopped reading the Daily Prophet. After the report on the chaos at the Third Task, there had been nothing. No mention of portkeys, or rituals, or dark lords. Instead, they mentioned an audit in the Department of International Magical Cooperation, Ludo Bagman on the run, quidditch, the usual bigoted opinion articles, the audit in the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Barty Crouch Senior's death was announced with no elaboration. Barty Crouch Junior had been quietly returned to Azkaban.

Harry readjusted the bag over his shoulder. His friends had silently parted ways. Jasmine was gone. Harry didn't know if he would see her again. He had told his friends the truth. He had been there, and half of them had no Death Eaters in the family to warn them.

Jasmine. Adrian. Cassius.

Harry.

There had been some altercation on the train. Draco Malfoy heckling his brother. Some other prefects had cleaned it up. He hadn't spoken to his brother since that night in the hospital wing. He did not know if Monty fully understood how much danger Harry was in. If the Dark Lord had even a *hint* of their friendship, he would use Harry. Harry could not say how, but he knew that a student close to Monty Potter was a very useful tool. If the Dark Lord knew they were brothers, Harry was dead.

His life was not more important than the Dark Lord's ultimate defeat. His dad had dedicated his life to it. If his dad was told to take him to the Dark Lord, Harry would go willingly.

Sighing, Harry joined the queue to leave the platform. He had a thousand galleons in his bag. He needed to go to Gringotts. He wanted Percy. He hadn't spoken to Percy since that night in the hospital wing. He should have pushed him away. He didn't know what to do anymore.

Kings Cross was crowded. He saw the Weasleys. Percy wasn't there, but the older brother Bill was. He and Mrs. Weasley were arguing with an ancient woman, who had her hand on Mafalda's shoulder. Mafalda looked extremely amused. He saw Vernon Dursley. He saw Sirius Black. He saw Professor Lupin. Harry found a pillar to lean against, hiding himself, watching discreetly as Black spoke to the Dursleys.

Harry sank to the ground, ignoring the dirty looks he got. He hit his head against the pillar. He hadn't slept for days, thinking of all the things he could have done differently. Better. Fight back. Apparate. Run away on foot. Turn into a squirrel. He tried to console himself; with the house-elf there, with the Dark Lord there, even diminished as he was, with Jorkins there. An injured sixteen-year-old wizard against an adult, a Dark Lord, and a house-elf.

He put his face in his hands. He needed to get up, go to Gringotts, go home. He didn't feel like doing anything. A spasm wracked his body, and Harry gritted his teeth against it. Madam Pomfrey promised it would eventually stop happening. She had given him potions to help.

"Alright, Evans?"

Harry looked up. Sirius Black was crouched next to him.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"I know about the graveyard," Black said. He held out a pack of cigarettes. Harry sighed, then took one.

"I don't want to see the same thing that happened to my brother happen to you," Black said, lighting the cigarette for him.

Harry inhaled, relishing the burn in his lungs. It made him feel something other than empty. He needed to get his shit together. He couldn't stand to be around himself.

Bertha Jorkins was dead. She had been eaten by a snake.

“It’s not,” Harry said, exhaling. He stuck the cigarette between his lips, then reached into his bag for his skateboard. “I’m not going to die.”

Black slapped his back, rather hard. “I’ll hold you to that, kid. It’d make Monty sad. He’s worried about you, you know.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “So?”

He doubted he fooled Black. He didn’t care. Harry ran down the station platform and jumped on his skateboard, leaving all his complications behind.

Severus stepped through the floo into Spinner’s End and crashed to the floor. He groaned, then pushed himself up. His arms were too weak to support himself, and he fell back down, breathing heavily.

It had been some time since he had experienced the Cruciatus Curse. The Dark Lord needed his pound of flesh. But Severus had convinced him. He was loyal. He had Dumbledore’s confidence, built up over years. Watching, waiting, knowing he had to be perfectly positioned to best serve his master.

It did little to abate the conflagration of the Dark Lord’s rage. Thirteen years’ repayment. The Dark Lord had tortured his son. He had put his *son* under Cruciatus. His son, whose whereabouts were currently unknown. Severus had to placate his masters.

Dumbledore knew. He knew Harry was his son. That Harry was Lily’s son. They did not know how his blood being used would affect Lily’s sacrifice.

They had all been made to tell the Dark Lord what they knew. Harry. A Ministry internship. A prefect. Head Boy candidate. Severus would have to ensure he *was* made Head Boy. Harry deserved it.

The Dark Lord was amused by the parallels. An impoverished boy of unknown origins, the top of his class, admired by the others in his house. And he had been used to restore the Dark Lord to his power. His blood had not yet been found wanting.

Severus shuddered, curling into himself. It was a rare moment of weakness. He was alone. His son was...somewhere. His son, who had manipulated the Dark Lord. If he knew how much Harry was hiding...

He pushed himself up. There was no time to wallow. He hadn’t earned it. The Dark Lord was disappointed with Severus. Severus had only delivered half of a prophecy. The Dark Lord wanted the rest. The headmaster had to be informed.

Severus stumbled up the stairs, bracing himself against the wall for support. He and Harry had discussed what might happen when the Dark Lord returned. When, never *if*. They knew

there was some inevitability. Those with parents in the inner circle would be expected to take the mark. The worst case scenario was the Dark Lord learning Harry was Lily's son. It was bad enough the boy was seen as a mudblood. They had proof, though, that he was not. Severus hoped to never need it. A token mudblood was currently amusing to their master. A boy who had proven himself, immediately, without hesitation.

He sat heavily on his bed. His son had killed. Murdered. He had not told Dumbledore. He had no intention to. He had dealt with the boy's wand himself. The corpse had been eaten by the snake.

Severus looked at the framed pictures on his bedside table. It was no longer safe to have them on display. He and Lily as children. His son as a baby. He reached into his robes, fumbling in a pocket. He pulled out a badge and set it next to the pictures.

EVANS RULES. POTTER DROOLS.

Severus put his face in his hands. For the first time since Lily's death, he wept.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, that's a lot of words.

Anyway, I've been thinking of splitting this up for a while. I did not know what I was getting into, and I'm genuinely surprised at how this has grown.

Thank you for your support, your comments, feedback, pointing out typos, and so on!

Time to crank this bitch into act two

Edit: I do want to say that I like how different parts of this story resonate with different people. Whether that's dealing with homophobia and other queerphobia, addiction, chronic illness, poverty, friendships, being a teenager, being a parent. Even gang violence, and losing friends to it. I know it's not for everyone, and not everyone can relate. I appreciate everyone who gave it a chance in spite of that.

Works inspired by this one

[Restricted Work] by [UnfriendlyMollusk](#)

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